THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TEACHING IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING PROGRAM WHO HAVE ESTABLISHED PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN THE SOUTHEASTERN U.S.

by

Amy Tyler Stevenson

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the shared experiences of teachers who have established presence in online classrooms after transitioning from face-to-face to online elementary classrooms in a virtual program developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory guiding this study was the community of inquiry (CoI) framework, developed by Garrison et al., as it specifically relates to distance and online learning and provides a context for research. In this qualitative study, data was collected through interviews, documentation, and a focus group with 11 online teachers (OT) representing several grade levels in an online program. Data was analyzed using a phenomenological process outlined by Moustakas and by employing open, axial, and selective coding to organize themes throughout the study. The setting of this study was an online program located in the southeastern U.S. Findings showed the importance of student-to-teacher and student-to-student relationships as well as providing professional development to OT that is relevant to online classrooms. A major finding of the study was that online classrooms can be as effective or more effective than face-to-face classrooms when best practices are implemented and presence has been established.

Keywords: COVID-19, online education, elementary, community of inquiry

Copyright Page

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to Theron Michael Stevenson, my husband and friend, who insisted I persevere toward this doctoral endeavor on account of it being a lifelong goal of mine. His prayers, support, and constant belief in me have been invaluable. I continually learn from his love and kindness. May we always continue to lift each other higher.

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First, I would like to thank the participants of this study, online teachers, who gave their time and expertise. They are truly trailblazers, and without their input, this study would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the school district and administrators for granting site approval and permitting me to conduct this study.

Special thanks go to my dissertation committee members for their guidance and encouragement. My Committee Chair, Dr. Kristy Motte, was exceptional in guiding me through the dissertation process and in helping me refine my research. I am grateful for the conversations and for what I learned from her. I would also like to thank Dr. Ellen Ziegler, who served as my Committee Member. Both of these women offered time, direction, wisdom, patience, and kindness that helped make the journey a good one. I am so very grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

Blended Learning (BL)

Bluebrook County School District (BCSD)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Cognitive Presence (CP)

Community of Inquiry (CoI)

Distance Education (DE)

Flipped Classroom Method (FCM)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade (K–12)

Online Teachers (OT)

Social Presence (SP)

Sub Question (SQ)

Teacher Presence (TP)

Theory of Transactional Distance (ToTD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

If there was any question about the validity of online education or its likelihood of growth before the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be no question now. Over 1.2 billion children in 186 countries experienced some form of online learning due to school closures in the spring of 2020 (Li & Lalani, 2020). In the U.S. alone, children from over 90% of households participated in distance learning (McElrath, 2020). Since then, many students have enrolled in online education programs by choice. This chapter includes background information regarding the historical context, social context, and theoretical context of the topic of online education. A problem statement and purpose statement are shared, as well as the significance of the study. Research questions and definitions are provided, and the chapter closes with a summary.

Background

In the recent wake of Covid-19, many school districts have found themselves scrambling to provide an alternative pathway to education through online learning, though the quality of online education has not been consistent, and experiences of OT and students have often varied (Lemay et al., 2021). Some teachers, however, have demonstrated success by evidence of student engagement, interaction, and student achievement (Harris et al., 2020; Kurt et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021). In order to facilitate OT who are capable of providing positive learning experiences for students, a better understanding of perceptions and experiences of K–12 OT is necessary (Farmer & West, 2019). The need for research regarding online learning is ongoing, particularly as it relates to elementary education (Arnesen et al., 2019). Researchers have termed online learning in a variety of ways to include cyber learning, e-learning, distance learning, virtual learning, web-based instruction, and online education (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Heafner et al.,

2019; Huang, 2020). Interaction has been determined to be a major factor that leads to success in traditional and online educational formats, thereby supporting the CoI theory, which recognizes the importance of epistemic engagement (Garrison et al., 2001). A goal of this study was to capture insights and recommendations from teachers who have led online classrooms successfully for the benefit of other teachers, administrators, and students. Though many studies have been conducted regarding online education in higher education, less have been published concerning K–12 education (Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019). This qualitative study examined shared experiences of teachers who established presence in their classrooms after transitioning from face-to-face teaching to online classrooms as a response to COVID-19.

Historical Context

Education has a long history in the U.S. Though children in certain areas or societies had opportunities to attend schools or receive tutoring in years prior, formal education was not available to all children in this country until the early 1900's, and traditionally occurred through face-to-face instruction (Froiland et al., 2019). Students were expected to go to school prepared and ready to learn, and student-teacher and peer relationships were not recognized as essential components of learning. At that time and in many years that followed, the idea that students would one day have the opportunity to learn at a distance as well as they could in a classroom was a preposterous one to most educators (Moore & Diehl, 2018). Education has evolved since then, however, initially offering alternative formats in higher education, but eventually at the K–12 level as well. Through this evolution, online education was born.

Online learning has gained popularity worldwide over recent years (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Farmer & West, 2019; Huh & Reigeluth, 2017; Kurt et al., 2021; Pattison et al., 2021; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Statti & Villegas, 2020).

Technology advancements have allowed people to teach and learn in dramatically different ways than have been afforded through traditional educational routes of the past (Huang, 2020; Statti & Villegas, 2020; Zhao & Watterson, 2021). K–12 online education started in the 1990s (Black et al., 2020). Since then, it has steadily become a viable option offered to students and families in school districts around the country (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Farmer & West, 2019; Gulosino & Moron, 2017; Smith et al., 2016). In some cases, students have performed as well or better in online classes compared with face-to-face classes (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Ye et al., 2021). Online education has not consistently yielded such positive results, however, as educational outcomes have been less than satisfactory in many cases (Black et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021). Teachers, parents, and students have often been unprepared to handle technological demands common to online education, and a perceived lack of community has been reported (Lemay et al., 2021; Miller, 2021). Recently, the shift to online education from face-to-face classrooms during COVID-19 was detrimental to students in many parts of the U.S. and around the world (Black et al., 2020), when schools in 137 countries were closed (World Bank, n.d.). As a result, many students and teachers were forced to continue K–12 and higher education coursework in an online format. Though online education may not be best for all students and families, the pandemic encouraged the exploration of educational alternatives, and it is quite possible that online learning is here to stay (Black et al., 2020).

Social Context

Communities, students, families, educators, and other stakeholders are affected by whatever outcomes result from educational systems (Yuliani & Hartanto, 2017). As a society, the understanding of and investment in online education is imperative since it has become a choice

in our educational system and impacts so many people. When considering the social context of online education, students, parents, and teachers are key participants.

Students are at the center of those impacted most by the transition from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms, whether by choice or in response to forced brick-and-mortar school shut-downs (Ye et al., 2021). The pandemic caused many parents to consider educational alternatives, especially for those who have children with health concerns (Black et al., 2020). Online learning provides students with special health care needs an alternative to attending school in a face-to-face setting, thereby allowing them to be members of a classroom while having a safer environment and more flexible scheduling. As is the case with face-to-face education, online education requires that students have opportunity to be active participants in their learning to truly be successful (Heafner et al., 2019; Higgins & BuShell, 2018). One way students may participate in their learning is through collaborative discussion with peers. Student engagement is considered a prerequisite for learning, and encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects (Chiu, 2021). Educational technology influences student engagement (Bedenlier et al., 2020). Research has shown that students are most engaged and have the highest motivation levels when online exchanges with content, peers, and teachers are interactive (Heafner et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important that educators and policymakers consider the ways students are encouraged to interact with content, peers, and teachers in online classrooms and to be consistent with the offerings of those opportunities throughout online programs (Heafner et al., 2019; Miller, 2021).

Parents play an important role in the development of their children socially, emotionally, and academically (Ye et al., 2021), and are also affected by the change from in-person learning to online learning classrooms for their children (Black et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021). Specifically,

regarding elementary-aged students who are part of online classrooms, students and parents typically spend more time together due to the need for oversight or assistance with technology and studies (Ye et al., 2021). Though there are benefits to more time spent together, online learning for elementary students has sometimes been a burden to parents due to challenges of balancing their own home and work life, technology issues, and a greater need to be involved in their children's education (Anderson et al., 2021). Some parents, however, have chosen to overcome the additional stresses that sometimes occur with online education because they believe their children are doing as well or better compared with their experiences with in-person learning, they feel their children have less distractions at home, or to maintain a sense of control over the physical welfare of their children (Anderson et al., 2021; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020).

In addition to students and families, teachers are also impacted by online education in many ways (Black et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to education, in both in-person and online educational formats (Shendell et al., 2021). During the weeks of school shut-downs that initially happened in response to COVID-19, many teachers reported feeling extreme stress due to a higher workload with increased hours, problems with school and technology infrastructures, time management related to serving students as well as their own children, student attendance issues, and lack of accountability for grade completion (Kaden, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Though relationship-building is one of the most effective methods for being a quality educator, inconsistent attendance, awkwardness for some students with speaking into a screen, and the inability to circulate the classroom were noted as challenges to building relationships with students by teachers (Adams & Jeter 2021). However, some teachers have chosen to remain in online classrooms to expand their teaching skills, have more flexibility to exercise creativity and

personalized education, offer stability to students, encourage students to thrive, and feel more appreciated by parents (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). OT have also appreciated the convenience of working from home and the perceived health benefits of not teaching in a face-to-face classroom during a global pandemic (Mukhtar et al., 2020; Powers et al., 2020).

Theoretical Context

Distance education (DE) was the beginning of online education and was proposed and developed into the theory of transactional distance (ToTD) in the 1970s (Moore & Diehl, 2018). The concept of transaction related to the exchanges between individuals and patterns of behavior in an environment originated with John Dewey and paralleled with the exchanges between teachers and learners in DE. The ToTD referenced teachers interacting with students to create knowledge and dialogue through use of communication technologies, which is still present today in various online learning formats.

The CoI theoretical framework of the 1990s also served as underpinning for online education, as it sought to understand how to deliver education at a distance through online learning (Moore & Diehl, 2018). CoI was developed by Garrison et al. (2001) and stressed the importance of creating an effective inquiry process to achieve higher-order learning through teaching presence, social presence (SP), and cognitive presence (CP) outside of the traditional classroom setting.

Moore and Diehel (2018) and Garrison (2007) focused on the importance of communication between teachers and students, as opposed to earlier theories that idealized student independence. The structure, dialogue, and independence of the ToTD parallel with the technology, design, and organization of CoI (Moore & Diehl, 2018). These two theoretical frameworks are woven throughout current online education, as students are afforded

opportunities to connect with teachers, other students, and content via online platforms that utilize technology advancements. This study examined research that has been done to investigate academic achievement, student collaboration, and increased self-efficacy in online students, and expanded the current body of knowledge related to the topic of online education by sharing experiences of teachers who have transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online elementary classrooms.

Problem Statement

The problem is, despite increased demand for online education for primary students from communities and families (An et al., 2021; Saqlain et al., 2020), the best practices for online elementary classrooms are not yet known. While studies have explored best practices for online undergraduate (Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019), graduate (Barbour & Harrison, 2016), and doctoral programs (Arslan-Ari et al., 2018; Slagle et al., 2021), those recommendations may not be relevant to primary and secondary settings. Though researchers have examined authenticity, engagement, and performance in secondary settings (Darling-Aduana, 2021), effective online education in elementary settings is largely unexplored (Arnesen et al., 2019; Tawfik et al., 2021). The establishments of teacher presence (TP), SP, and CP are so important for the support of students in online classrooms (Caskurlu et al., 2021; Garrison et al., 2018; Kilis & Yildirim, 2018; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Zhang & Lin, 2021), and strategies for establishing presence at the elementary level are still needed.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of teachers establishing presence in online elementary classrooms. At this stage in the research and for the purposes of this study, establishing presence is generally defined as

fostering connectedness and student engagement in the classroom. The theory guiding this study is the CoI as it specifically relates to distance and online learning and was used to understand teacher experiences in online settings through teaching, social, and CP.

Significance of the Study

COVID-19 gave online programs that were in infancy a jumpstart and spurred on the need for new online programs to be developed (Kaden, 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021). Many students and families were exposed to online education out of a sense of urgency but learned from the experience that there were certain benefits that appealed to them about online education (Black et al., 2020). For some families who have been dissatisfied with traditional public schools, online education has provided an alternative option (Statti & Villegas, 2020). Other students and families struggled in online education and returned to brick-and-mortar schools as soon as possible.

Theoretical Significance

The CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2001) was applied throughout this study to investigate the experiences of elementary teachers establishing CP, SP, and TP in online classrooms. CoI is one of the most referenced theories in online education (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). In recent years, the CoI framework has been adapted to K–12 online education in various studies that have revealed possible factors that contribute to online success as well as some of the practices and beliefs of OT (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Zhang & Lin, 2021). This study extended the literature on the topic specifically at the elementary level. This study could also result in a deeper understanding of the experiences that contribute to successful elementary online classrooms and minimize the perceived distance (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020) between teachers and students in online settings.

Empirical Significance

This study aimed to contribute to the knowledge base and discipline of online education at the elementary level. The purpose of this research study was to fill a gap in the literature to address the problem that the demand for online education has increased abruptly. Further research to identify best practices of K–12 OT has been recommended in other studies (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Zhang & Lin, 2021). The findings from this study, including phenomenological descriptions, themes, and subthemes, have empirical significance as they support existing literature while expanding the literature with new information. The findings from interviews and focus groups administered to participants in this study, as well as evidence collected through documentation, may provide significant empirical results to educational leaders that may lend to positive online classroom experiences for students, teachers, and families.

Practical Significance

The role of supporting students online looks very different than supporting students in a face-to-face environment (Baker et al., 2021; Kaden, 2020; Rice & Ortiz, 2021). The results of this study may be useful to the school district to which it applies, teachers in online classrooms, and other districts that may be interested in developing virtual programs. It may help students, parents, teachers, and peer-to-peer relationships by providing information relevant to online elementary classrooms and offering implications for best practices. There was no time for extensive research when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which heightens the importance of understanding teacher experiences regarding teaching in online classrooms now. Hopefully, this study will help improve classrooms and work environments for teachers and students by helping

to identify common themes that yielded positive results, and by offering suggestions for teacher support going forward.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study's research questions was to identify and understand the perspectives of teachers who teach in online elementary classrooms. The questions sought to solicit feedback from teachers that describes their perceptions related to establishing a presence in online classrooms. Participants were asked about teaching presence, SP, and CP in their classrooms, per the CoI framework guiding this study.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of elementary teachers who have established presence in online classrooms?

Sub Question One

How do online elementary teachers foster student success through teacher presence?

Sub Question Two

How do online elementary teachers foster a cohesive classroom environment through social presence?

Sub Question Three

How do online elementary teachers foster student success through cognitive presence?

Sub Question Four

How do online elementary school teachers describe their professional development experiences?

Definitions

1. *Cognitive presence* – A developmental model consistent with the CoI framework that

happens through the practical inquiry model and involves reflective inquiry (Garrison et al., 2010).

2. *Distance education* –DE is instruction and learning that is separated by location (Blaine, 2019; Garrison et al., 2001). In DE, the majority or all of the content is delivered at a distance.
3. *Online education* – Classes offered to students through a web-based (internet) format (Kulal & Nayak, 2020).
4. *Social presence* – The feeling of community a learner experiences online (Garrison et al., 2010).
5. *Teacher presence* – A significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community. It involves guiding students through cognitive and social processes to realize meaningful and educational learning outcomes (Garrison et al., 2010).

Summary

The outbreak of COVID-19 profoundly altered many aspects of life, including education, all over the world (Humrickhouse, 2021; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Rice & Ortiz, 2021; Tawfik et al., 2021; Todd, 2020). Prior to that, a need already existed for additional research to better understand evidence-based best practices in online teaching at the K–12 level (Farmer & West, 2019; Huh & Reigeluth, 2017). Though some online programs already existed when the pandemic occurred, educational systems were forced to implement various forms of distance or online learning that they had not previously had the luxury of planning for at the time of COVID-19 shutdowns, and many teachers found themselves shifting to instruction through a completely different platform than was previously the case with face-to-face instruction (Humrickhouse, 2021; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021; Todd, 2020). The dramatic

increase in online programs has only made the need for additional research stronger, as educators, families, and students continue to navigate online learner experiences (Todd, 2020). Now that social restrictions are beginning to lessen and many students have returned to brick-and-mortar schools, many other students and families continue to choose online education. Likewise, many educators have found a niche in online platforms. Though some cases of online learning across the U.S. resulted in low student achievement and left students and families feeling disconnected (Black et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021), some online experiences were positive (Powers et al., 2020). This study explored the experiences of online elementary teachers who represent a variety of different schools while all working in one virtual program that was established after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers all transitioned from face-to-face teaching to online classrooms and have shown evidence of establishing presence in their classrooms. Research from this study gave voice to the ones who need to be heard, the teachers who have somehow found success during a very chaotic and trying time in our nation's history. Results produced possible directives for applications of future online learning in similar programs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to provide a foundation for my study that will describe the experiences of teachers who have established presence in online classrooms in an online program that was established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online education is a widely studied topic in the current research literature, though most of the research focuses on higher education. Online studies of elementary classrooms in the U.S. have been particularly underrepresented. This chapter presents a review of the current literature related to the topic of study, and the purpose of this literature review is to examine what research has been conducted regarding online education, specifically at the K–12 level, training specific to online educators, as well as impacts on teachers, students, and families regarding online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first section, the CoI framework is discussed, followed by a synthesis of recent literature regarding teacher perceptions, classroom environments, student achievement, and professional development as each relates to online education. In the end, a gap in the literature is identified, presenting a reasonable need for the current study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2001). CoI is one of the most referenced theories in online education (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020) and has clearly informed recent literature surrounding my topic (Blaine, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Kilis & Yildirim, 2018). In this study, CoI was used to shape research questions and reporting results.

According to Garrison and Akyol (2013), a CoI is "a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal

meaning and confirm mutual understanding" (p. 106). In this study, CoI was applied to online elementary school classrooms. Results from this study have added to the CoI theory by extending its application to online elementary school classrooms.

Development of CoI

CoI was initially developed in 2000 by Garrison (2010) for the purpose of connecting online text-based communication, teacher issues, and cognitive goals of DE. The model describes critical elements of a successful higher education online learning experience based on the educational philosophy of Dewey and social constructivism (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Garrison, 2017). The Col framework is transferable to other levels of online education, however, as it focuses on processes that lead to epistemic engagement and conceptual parts needed to construct collaborative online environments (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010).

Components of CoI

The study applied the CoI framework by exploring experiences of teachers establishing connectedness in the form of presences in their online classrooms. School connectedness refers to positive interactions with adults, a sense of belonging, positive peer relationships, student engagement, and student safety (Page et al., 2021). Three key elements of the CoI framework include CP, SP, and teaching presence (Blaine, 2019; Caskurlu et al., 2021; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Garrison et al., 2001, 2010; Kilis & Yildirim, 2018; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020).

TP

TP is determined by the course design, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction established in an online learning environment (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison, 2001, 2017). One important aspect of TP is evidence of regular and timely feedback (Gage et al., 2018; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020), which has been associated with improved student outcomes such as increased academic engagement and decreased disruptive behaviors (Gage et al., 2018).

TP is noted in several studies as the first and/or most important component of the CoI framework (Zhang & Lin, 2021). Some researchers have suggested that the main reason students do not reach the highest levels of inquiry through discussion is related to the innate role of the teacher as the director in a classroom, which omits the students as active participants and fails to engage students (Garrison et al., 2010). A large body of evidence attests to the importance of TP in successful online learning (An et al., 2021; Gage et al., 2018; Garrison et al., 2010).

CP

CP refers to the way a student explores and constructs understanding, specifically as it relates to an online environment (Garrison et al., 2010). One important aspect of CP is the progression by which students move from understanding a problem or issue to exploration, integration, and then application. Research has shown that inquiry often occurs easily at the exploration stage, but students frequently experience greater difficulty moving beyond that stage and into the stages of integration and application, which are more demanding and seem to be directly related to aspects of TP.

SP

Another presence referenced in the triad of the CoI framework is SP. SP is the ability of a student to come across as a real person in a classroom of peers in an online learning environment (Garrison et al., 2001). This involves three main steps (a) acquiring a social identity, (b) having purposeful communication, and (c) building relationships (Garrison et al., 2001; Kreijns et al., 2014). Research has shown that SP is related to the degree of participation and interaction between group members and affects learning outcomes and the degree of satisfaction of group members, so is critical for online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2010).

Related Literature

As CoI (Garrison, 2007) provides a theoretical framework for the study, a contextual background for this study is offered through related literature. The purpose of this section is to examine the literature surrounding online education so that a synthesis of the existing knowledge on the topic will link to the significance of this study. This section begins by providing a general description of online education. In addition, information regarding online learning in response to COVID-19, teacher perceptions, classroom environments, student achievement, known best practices, and teacher support are addressed and provide a backdrop for updated research on the topic of online learning.

Online Education

K–12 online education started in the mid-1990s and was referred to as online and blended instruction (Black et al., 2020). Researchers have termed online learning in a variety of ways to include e-learning, distance learning, remote learning, virtual learning, web-based instruction, and online education (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Heafner et al., 2019; Huang, 2020; Rasmitadila, 2020; Saqlain et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021). Despite the different descriptions, the consensus is that online learning is defined as an educational platform in which teachers and students are separated geographically, and instruction is provided over the internet with the absence of a physical classroom as a key feature (Black et al., 2021; Blaine, 2019; Burdina et al., 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Huh & Reigeluth, 2017; Humrickhouse, 2021; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Though online learning has been around for many years, it has grown in popularity in K–12 and higher education communities all over the world in recent years, specifically over the last decade (An et al., 2021; Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Farmer & West, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Huh & Reigeluth, 2017; Kurt et al., 2021;

Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Saqlain et al., 2020; Toppin & Toppin, 2016). It is especially relevant following the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, during which the majority of school systems in the U.S. temporarily moved to a web-based platform (An et al., 2021; Baker et al., 2021; Kaden, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Page et al., 2021; Pattison et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2020; Wang, 2020; Ye et al., 2021). In addition to providing an alternative mode of instructional delivery, the literature suggests that the expansion of K–12 online learning is also a reasonable means of dealing with overcrowded schools and budget cuts (Saqlain et al., 2020). Literature has shown that some students and families have appreciated online education due to social concerns, safety issues, bullying, convenience, and/or flexibility of scheduling (Davis et al., 2019; Toppin & Toppin, 2016). Though some studies have been done regarding online education at the K–12 level, the majority of the research studies conducted regarding online programs have focused on higher education (An et al., 2021; Heafner et al., 2019).

Some comparative studies of traditional, blended, and fully online methods of learning have shown that each of the methods may be productive and beneficial, depending on the implementation of instruction and opportunities for student interaction in the classroom (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Heafner et al., 2019). Literature suggests that a lack of quality interaction between students or students and teachers accounts for many of the problems students encounter in any of the aforementioned learning environments (Blaine, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Klein, 2020). Some literature suggests that, unlike traditional educational settings where students are often able to ~~passively~~ receive information provided by teachers passively, students in online classrooms need to be active learners with more self-efficacy, who can handle more control over their own learning processes (Huh & Reigeluth, 2017; Kurt et al., 2021; Tawfik et al., 2021). Not all researchers have found performance benefits of online education; however, as some studies

have noted the outperformance of students in traditional schools over those in online programs (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; Molnar et al., 2019). One clear feature of online learning is the ability to present content in a variety of ways, such as synchronously, asynchronously, or through blended learning (BL; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Shoepe et al., 2020), which allows personalized instruction for students (An et al., 2021; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). It appears online education is here to stay (Black et al., 2020; Shoepe et al., 2020).

Synchronous Online Instruction

Synchronous online instruction happens in real-time (Burdina et al., 2019; Lemov, 2020; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). In this case, communication between the students and teacher occurs similarly to how they might in a face-to-face classroom using audio and visual technologies (Burdina et al., 2019; Lemay et al, 2021). In a synchronous online classroom, the teacher and students meet at designated times and interact accordingly. Regular class lessons occur based on student discussions and whole-class activities (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). Synchronous online instruction allows for immediate feedback from the teacher and students and allows interaction between students in the form of whole-class and small group collaboration (Lemay et al., 2021; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). According to Lemay et al., there is a greater likelihood of engagement in synchronous learning than in asynchronous learning. Though there are benefits to synchronous learning, there are also limitations. Coordination of all participants logging on at the same time is sometimes tricky, background noises and other distractions occur, and screen fatigue reduces the attention span of students.

Asynchronous Online Instruction

Asynchronous online instruction occurs in delayed time and consists of one-way communication (Burdina et al., 2019; Shoepe et al., 2020; Wang & Wang, 2021). In asynchronous online instruction, learning happens at different times and in different places,

rather than with a teacher and students altogether in a classroom (Lemay et al, 2021; Wang & Wang, 2021). Though audio and visual technologies are still utilized by the teacher and students, this method of instruction does not require that they meet at specific times and students are able to work at their own pace. For example, a teacher may post lessons in the form of videos for students to view and respond to through written or recorded assignments.

Asynchronous online instruction is often appealing to families with students who have medical needs that may require a flexible schedule, those who travel due to extracurricular activities or parental careers (Davis et al., 2019; Saqlain et al., 2020), and adult learners who have responsibilities aside from school (Adams & Wilson, 2020). It is not uncommon in an asynchronous classroom for assignments to be completed by students with little or no personal interaction with classmates or a teacher (Adams & Wilson, 2020; Lemay et al, 2021). However, some research suggests that interaction is offered in some asynchronous classrooms in the form of email correspondence, discussion boards, and/or collaborative annotation tools developed by software companies and implemented as support to instruction (Adams & Wilson, 2020).

Blended Learning

There are many types of BL models (Pulham & Graham, 2018). BL is a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, and usually includes part of instruction being face-to-face and part of instruction being conducted online (Gulosino & Miron, 2017; Pulham & Graham, 2018; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). Pulham and Graham conducted a literature review that included a comparison of blended teaching competencies and online teaching competencies at the K–12 level. The literature revealed four categories of learning interactions that may occur in BL to include: human interaction through the use of technology, content interaction through the use of technology, in-person human interaction, and physical interaction with content. To date, there is no single definition or standard ratio of time spent in synchronous or asynchronous,

online or in-person, expected for BL (Kurt et al., 2021; Short et al., 2021). One form of BL that has gained popularity in recent years is the flipped classroom (Erdemir & Yangın Ekşi, 2019; Humrickhouse, 2021; Kurt et al., 2021; Thai et al, 2020; Thongkoo et al, 2019), which is just one example of an educational innovation that has been developed to enhance student learning (Katsa et al., 2016).

The flipped classroom method (FCM) has been used in higher education for many years (Humrickhouse, 2021; Kurt et al., 2021; Thai et al., 2020). In recent years, the FCM has also become a method used in K–12 classrooms (Katsa et al., 2016). It is a form of BL in which students participate in some form of self-regulated learning, whether still in a classroom or online (Humrickhouse, 2021; Kurt et al., 2021; Winter, 2018). The concept of a flipped classroom is grounded in the constructivist theory of learning (Strayer, 2012), and is considered a student-centered instructional model (Kurt et al., 2021; Winter, 2018). The model aims to make space for better use of in-person class time by reducing the amount of teacher lecture and increasing active learning and collaboration on the part of students (Katsa et al., 2016; Winter, 2018). The FCM encourages student ownership of learning and allows students to work at their own pace for at least a portion of instructional time, which is a form of self-regulated learning (Humrickhouse, 2021; Katsa et al., 2016). An example of a flipped classroom would be students engaging in certain assigned web-based activities prior to synchronous instructional time, meeting with the teacher and peers to ask questions and discuss content, and then receiving feedback from the teacher (Humrickhouse, 2021; Thai et al., 2020). Research has shown that participation in flipped classrooms results in positive student achievement (Lai & Hwang, 2016; Thai et al., 2020), especially when guided questions and constructive feedback are provided to students by the teacher (Thai et al., 2020).

Impact of COVID-19

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators have found themselves scrambling to provide high-quality education that is equitable to all students (Adams & Jeter, 2021; Farmer & West, 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Klein, 2020; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). The need for social distancing as an attempt to defend against the spread of COVID-19 caused educational entities of K–12 education as well as higher education to shift from traditional classroom learning to online classrooms in the spring of 2020 (Baker et al., 2021; Kaden, 2020; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Lemay et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2020; Todd, 2020) when school closures affected over 1.2 billion children in over 180 countries (Li & Lalani, 2020). The experiences of OT during that time varied, as many teachers were unprepared to teach in online settings, and technology was not equitable for all students and teachers (Adams & Jeter, 2021; Elish-Piper, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021). Applications of best practices were often inconsistent and inequitable as well (Baker et al., 2021; Farmer & West, 2019; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Pattison et al., 2021; Todd, 2020). Many studies report low academic achievement, learning loss, or negative impacts on health and the overall well-being of students during the initial shutdown when so many students experienced eLearning (Anderson et al., 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Middleton, 2020).

Though the quick shift to online education due to COVID-19 was stressful to many students, families, and teachers (Anderson et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021) and research has shown that online education is not best for everyone (Black et al., 2020; Miller, 2021), it also paved the way for continued technology advancements and partnerships with software companies and educational broadcasts, such as Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), to facilitate education (Li & Lalani,

2020). Technology had been used in education for decades, but a sudden increase in the use of technology occurred, and people in the U.S. and around the world were exposed to online education more than ever before at the K–12 level as well as in higher education (Black et al., 2020; Rahayu et al., 2022). Some students, families, and teachers discovered major benefits to online education (Saqlain et al., 2020), which likely contributed to the continued increase of online education, even after brick-and-mortar schools reopened following the initial closures due to COVID-19. Because of the pandemic, many parents began to explore alternative educational experiences for their children (Black et al., 2020).

Teacher Perceptions of Online Learning

To produce OT who are able to create and deliver meaningful learning experiences for students, professional development and teacher education programs must solicit and understand the experiences of online K–12 teachers (Farmer & West, 2019). Literature has offered teacher perceptions related to their preparedness to teach in an online setting, as well as the benefits and challenges of teaching in an online classroom before and during the pandemic (An et al., 2021; Farmer & West, 2019; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Todd, 2020). Studies have shown that teachers have had mixed opinions about teaching in online classrooms (An et al., 2021; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Todd, 2020), and those teachers have consistently indicated a lack of preparation to teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Middleton, 2020).

Teachers are the cornerstones of education (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2015). The way they approach teaching directly relates to teacher perceptions of the learning environment, which directly impacts student learning outcomes (Lemay et al., 2021). For that reason and as support for action plans for potential online learning situations, understanding teacher perceptions is

vital, including how well-prepared they view themselves to be, as well as what they deem advantages and disadvantages of teaching in online classrooms (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020).

Teacher Preparation

OT often suffer from a lack of training specific to online education (Farmer & West, 2019; Wang, 2020). When asked, many teachers expressed opinions of lack of preparedness related to transitioning to online classrooms during the COVID-19 shift that occurred in the spring of 2020 (Middleton, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). According to the literature, teachers realize the importance of technological competencies, but often have low perceptions of their abilities related to those competencies (Martin et al., 2019; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). However, some teachers have also said the professional development they have been offered to teach online has been helpful and effective (Klein, 2020).

Though some commonalities exist between face-to-face and online teacher practice, there are key differences (An et al., 2021; Farmer & West, 2019; Lemay et al., 2021; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). For example, one difference is the amount of monitoring, facilitating, and troubleshooting technology-use and technology issues (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). Another difference is an increased responsibility to model and promote online communication etiquette and to enforce proper online etiquette with students. Due to technological developments, the need for teachers to consider new ways to organize, prepare, deliver, and assess learning materials and instruction for online teaching is constant (Martin et al., 2019).

Research has shown that teachers feel more prepared and have more confidence with some tasks related to online learning over others (Farmer & West, 2019; Martin et al., 2019). For example, some teachers have rated sending announcements and email communication, organizing online instructional materials and assessment, grading assignments, scheduling, and managing the learning management system and documents as areas of strength (Martin et al.,

2019). Research has also shown that faculty with little or no online teaching experience perceived their abilities in online teaching as lower than those with more experience. Teachers perceive that they have a responsibility to build a strong classroom environment through active involvement in their online classrooms (Miller, 2021), and teachers often do not feel secure in the training they have received to be able to do that (Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). A lack of professional development and/or little time to prepare for use of new technology has been a concern for many teachers (Baker et al., 2021; Wang, 2020).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching Online

Little information about teacher perceptions of the advantages of teaching in an online classroom has been found in the literature. Some research has shown that some teachers perceive flexible scheduling, convenience, saved travel time, lack of extra school duties, easier classroom management, and the ability to reach students in rural areas as benefits of teaching in online classrooms (Davis et al., 2019; Kulal & Nayak, 2020). For some teachers, K–12 online education has become a more favorable choice than working in face-to-face classroom environments because they believe they are able to engage with students in a more meaningful way and build a stronger sense of community in the absence of certain classroom management issues that typically exist in a traditional classroom (Statti & Villegas, 2020). Some advocates of online learning say there is more potential to foster 21st-century skills through individualized instruction in an online classroom than in a face-to-face classroom (Saqlain et al., 2020). In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, some teachers have been concerned about safety issues related to in-person teaching (Pittinsky, 2020; Shendell et al., 2021), which is remedied by teaching online.

Teachers have recognized an array of disadvantages to teaching in an online setting (Kaden, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Todd, 2020). Some studies suggest that teachers identify technical issues, organizational problems related to the accountability of students, and/or inequity of access to web-based platforms as primary disadvantages or concerns in regard to teaching in online classrooms (Kaden, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Todd, 2020). Legitimate concerns have also been raised by educators regarding technology inclusion, with the focus being that technology may be a great supplement to instruction but cannot effectively replace direct instruction (Seward & Nguyen, 2019). Overall, teachers have stated stresses regarding operational differences between online classrooms and traditional classrooms (Kaden, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Todd, 2020).

Some research shows similarities between teaching in traditional classrooms and teaching in online classrooms (Goralski & Falk, 2017), through some researchers disagree and believe that teaching online is different from teaching in a physical classroom in the way teachers prepare and interact with students and the amount of time it takes to prepare and assess students (Farmer & West, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Todd, 2020). Research suggests that extra time is needed to teach concepts online than in face-to-face learning environments, which has caused some OT concern about balancing interactions with students and other teacher obligations (Farmer & West, 2019, Kaden, 2020). In addition, teachers in online classroom settings must manage diverse student populations without the benefits of close proximity (Farmer & West, 2019).

Online classrooms are also different than face-to-face classrooms for students (Midcalf & Boatright, 2020). Studies show that teachers have recognized that many K–12 online learners

have faced problems with content comprehension and that online instruction requires greater learner control and reflection about the ways they interact with instructors, peers, and content than what is required in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment (Heafner, 2019; Kaden, 2020; Middleton, 2020). Though some research indicates the struggles of students in online classrooms (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Lemay et al., 2021), other research has shown that students retain information more efficiently in an online environment and that they are able to learn at a quicker rate than in face-to-face classrooms, due to the ability to work at their own pace (Li & Lalani, 2020; Ye et al., 2021).

An additional concern expressed in the literature by teachers is that of worry for the emotional health and physical wellbeing of students (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Pattison et al., 2021). This was especially true during the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers expressed concern for vulnerable students who need the physical and emotional support of a face-to-face classroom environment, may not be safe in their own homes, may not have enough to eat, or who suffer from anxiety (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Other perspectives regarding disadvantages of teaching online specifically during the COVID-19 transition to eLearning include communication with parents and/or students, lack of technology/internet, and students not doing work (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Some teachers embraced the new situation and improved their styles of teaching, saw students thrive, and believed parents were more supportive during that time than when students were previously learning in face-to-face classrooms.

Other Perceptions

Students and parents have also offered opinions of online education, and many of them have been positive. Students have shared that online learning encourages student-centeredness

and helps students become self-directed learners (Mukhar et al., 2020). Younger students appear to benefit from synchronous instruction due to the structure offered (Lemay et al., 2021), while older students often prefer asynchronous instruction due to the ability to attend school at any time of the day (Mukhar et al., 2020). A well-planned course design, good time management, and understanding of how to use learning technologies have all been identified by students as factors that can impact online learning positively (Lemay et al., 2021).

Some parents have reported that their children perform better in online classrooms due to fewer distractions at home than in face-to-face classrooms (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Other parents have explored online education out of medical concerns for their children since staying at home reduces certain medical risks (Black et al., 2020). Many children with special health care needs have performed well in online classrooms.

Not all feedback from students and parents has been positive. Some students have reported difficulty with learning practical and clinical work online (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Students have also expressed difficulty with maintaining attention in online classrooms for extended periods of time (Li & Lalani, 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2021). Technical problems, lack of community, time compression, unclear course objectives, and a lack of an appropriate study environment have been identified by students as factors that can impact online learning negatively (Lemay et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021).

In some cases, parents have indicated concern about increased anxiety or decreased mental health in students when participating in online education (Ye et al., 2021). They have requested more interaction with teachers, increased availability of teachers to students, more peer interactions during class time, and more feedback from teachers about homework. Parents have noted the time involved in providing extra help to students as the biggest challenge of having

their children enrolled in online classrooms (Anderson, 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Concerns in response to the forced eLearning due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 by parents were often related to lack of access to the internet or computers.

Classroom Environment

Work conditions, student engagement, and interactions between students and their peers and students and their teachers impact the culture of a classroom environment (Kalin et al., 2017; Kane et al., 2011; Kurt et al., 2021; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). Maximization of instructional time happens most frequently within a positive classroom environment (Lopes et al., 2017). Literature shows that frequent, high-quality interaction in K–12 online settings is critical for student success (Blaine, 2019; Kurt et al., 2021; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). For the purpose of this study, interaction refers to peer to peer, student and teacher, and peer to content. The teacher's role in a classroom is essential in creating a classroom environment that fosters interaction, engagement, and student success (Gage et al., 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Shoepe et al., 2020). Research shows that the level of active engagement of students correlates with the level of interaction the teacher has with the class (Gage et al., 2018). Students benefit from positive rapport with the classroom teacher (Gage et al., 2018; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). Classroom management, collaboration, and student access to information and materials are all key parts of a classroom environment in online and in face-to-face classrooms (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to specific actions taken to develop and maintain a learning environment conducive to instruction and learning (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). According to the literature, teacher-learner relationships are a key aspect of positive classroom management (Gage et al., 2018; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). Research has

shown that effective classroom management has a direct impact on student success behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally (Gage et al., 2018; Kalin et al., 2017; Miller, 2021; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020; Prilop et al., 2021). A large body of research has shown a direct correlation between classroom management and student achievement (Gage et al.,2018; Kalin et al., 2017; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020; Prilop et al., 2021). A poorly managed classroom will not yield effective teaching and learning, and students achieve higher when in a classroom with a highly effective teacher than one with an ineffective teacher (Korpershoek et al., 2016).

Consistent classroom management promotes cooperation between students and helps to create a warm and supportive classroom environment (Kalin et al., 2017). While active engagement and interaction are predictors of student success, disruptive behavior and lack of engagement are predictors of student failure (Gage et al., 2018; Korpershoek et al, 2016). At all levels of instruction, procedures and routines are key to fluid classroom management that encourages student focus and attention (Lemay et al., 2021; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). Though instruction may occur in a synchronous, asynchronous, or blended-learning environment at all levels of online instruction, the literature suggests that misbehavior of students typically increases until the early years of high school and then begins to steadily decline (Lopes et al., 2017). This is one reason classroom management strategies often look different and are more intentional in K–12 online classrooms than in higher education online classrooms.

K–12 Online Learning. Some methods used for classroom management in K–12 online classrooms are similar to those used in face-to-face classrooms. For example, the importance of setting routines and procedures in any classroom is high (Lemay et al., 2021; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020). Establishing specific means of participation, teaching students how to organize

their personal workspaces, establishing a consistent sequence, offering clear directives, and maintaining working memory are some methods used in online K–12 classrooms to keep classroom management flowing smoothly (Kane et al., 2011; Lemay et al., 2021). Very few studies have been found to show common strategies regarding specific activities or procedures implemented in online K–12 classrooms.

One classroom management strategy for teachers in online K–12 classrooms is to open each lesson with a slide describing materials that will be needed during the lesson in an effort to set expectations and improve the chances that students will enter the lesson prepared to learn (Lemay et al., 2021). Another effective strategy is Cold Call, which is common in the online world, according to the literature. Cold Call normalizes participation since students never know when they will be called on by the teacher to respond. Providing multiple opportunities for interaction between students as well as the teacher and students is another method of maintaining positive online classroom management (Gage et al., 2018; Lemay et al., 2021).

Higher Education. As is the case with K–12 online classrooms, classroom management is a fundamental part of successful learning experiences for students (Al-Shammari, 2016; Gage et al., 2018; Korpershoek et al., 2016), and establishing clear rules and procedures is crucial (Lopes et al., 2017). Classroom management in online higher education classrooms focuses less on behavior management and more on the structure and expectations of the course (Al-Shammari, 2016). For example, online instructors are advised to develop and implement classroom management techniques that will encourage classroom attendance, which has been directly correlated with positive student achievement. In addition to establishing procedural policies and attendance requirements, modeling classroom strategies for students, using the strategies consistently, and applying them to appropriate contexts within the classroom have all

been noted in the literature as valuable steps toward positive classroom management in higher education.

Collaboration

In line with the CoI framework, which stresses the importance of SP and each student having opportunity to be seen as a real person in an online classroom (Garrison, 2017), research has shown that students view working in small groups on various learning activities as valuable, since the collaboration helps them be involved in their learning (Caskurlu et al., 2021). Group work and team projects are made possible in an online learning format synchronously and asynchronously through digital presentation and document-sharing platforms such as Prezi and Google Docs, which allow students to share work and ideas with each other (Reason et al., 2017), and through the implementation of mobile devices (Statti & Villegas, 2020). Research has shown that students find having a sense of community in online learning, which affords them a positive learning climate and confidence to interact with peers, important in relation to online classroom environments (Caskurlu et al., 2021; Kalin et al., 2017). A sense of community also supports emotional engagement, which has been shown to support academic achievement (Kurt et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021).

Multiple strategies to foster collaboration in online classrooms are provided in the literature. Student-centered video conferences allow students to discuss content from lessons, share presentations, and offer peer feedback (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). In addition to use of conferencing platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom, it is a common practice for breakout rooms to be set up in advance by a teacher to allow students to take part in peer-to-peer collaborative discussions synchronously during class time (Lemay et al., 2021). A teacher is able to visit breakout rooms to observe and/or participate in discussions, but the primary purpose for the breakout rooms is for student collaboration. Some other strategies include use of the chatbox

(Lemay et al., 2021), FCM implementation for online collaborative writing, discussion boards, and peer-reviewed writing assignments (Krishnan et al., 2021).

Student Access to Information and Materials

Ease of access to information, including digital formats, content, and materials in a classroom, is essential for student success and directly impacts the flow of a classroom environment (Lemay et al., 2021). In an online classroom, if there is no flow or students have to struggle to find or open online resources, participation is inhibited and there is a breakdown in communication (Garrison, 2017; Kurt et al., 2021; Statti & Villegas, 2020). Organization of the classroom, including links to applications and other integrated technology, notes, videos, opportunities for student collaboration, announcements, and methods of interaction in a classroom is primarily the responsibility of the teacher, though the design of whatever system is being used in the school to deliver online education rests on administrators and other decision-making stakeholders (Garrison, 2017; Huang, 2020).

Though traditional text literacy will remain an important 21st-century skill, making a way for students to increase their technological literacy is especially important in online classrooms (Seward & Nguyen, 2019; Virata & Castro, 2019). It is imperative that teachers develop technology awareness and dexterity in students and themselves (Seward & Nguyen, 2019). Ensuring that all students have the proper equipment to participate in an online classroom and that proper infrastructure is in place for all students, teaching students about online safety and etiquette, and discussing plagiarism issues and how to properly cite material is essential.

Student Achievement

Literature shows that parental support, student motivation, strong classroom management, and student engagement all have been linked to positive student achievement (Boonk et al., 2018; Kalin et al., 2017; Kurt et al., 2021; Prilop et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2021),

which is a widely understood phenomenon regardless of whether referring to face-to-face education or online education. Teachers also have a large impact on the likelihood of student success, despite a variety of other factors (Gage et al., 2018). Working methods of teachers, instructional techniques, positive and stable classroom management, effective communication, and co-cooperation between teachers and parents have also been named as correlates to student achievement in the literature (Kalin et al., 2017). A synthesis of older studies supports the findings of a recent study, which shows the value to students of clarity in course design and expectations (Caskurlu et al., 2021).

Student achievement is related specifically to CP in the CoI framework but is also affected by SP and teaching presence (Garrison, 2017). Though technology can be a useful part of education, it cannot alone replace the human interaction that is typically fostered in K–12 classrooms (Anderson, 2020; Hess, 2020; Powers et al., 2020). Research has repeatedly shown that student interaction is a key indicator of positive student achievement (Blaine, 2019; Kurt et al., 2021; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). For this reason, it is imperative that OT continue to develop ways to foster student interaction in their online classrooms.

Best Practices of Online Education

Certain educational practices are commonly known to yield high-quality results, regardless of the level of education or learning format. Some examples include: use of standards-based instructional activities, providing constructive and timely feedback, and engaging students in discussions surrounding content knowledge (Kane et al., 2011). With the rise of demand for online education in recent years, a need exists for exploring and defining best practices in both K–12 and higher education online environments (Lewis, 2021; Toppin & Toppin, 2016). Some teachers have embraced the changes that have come along with online education by enhancing

course instruction through the use of technology and communication skills in an effort to assist students with content mastery (Wilson, 2018). Specific literature surrounding best practices for online education is sparse, though more information can be found regarding online classes in higher education than regarding K–12 online classrooms (Toppin & Toppin, 2016).

K–12 Education

Though very few studies have been conducted regarding best practices in K–12 online classrooms (Toppin & Toppin, 2016), technology issues have been named in literature as a frequent challenge or stressor in online education (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021; Virata & Castro, 2019; Wilson, 2018), which makes practicing flexibility with technology one the best practices of K–12 OT (Seward & Nguyen, 2019). Since technology is an important component to the success of online educational implementation, it is necessary for teachers to make it a priority to become familiar with trouble-shooting technology and familiarizing their students with basic technology skills and resources (Toppin & Toppin, 2016). Other best practices suggested in the literature include demonstrating care of students through positive communication (Miller, 2021; Page et al, 2021), fostering collaboration by offering ample opportunities for students to interact with peers (Shoepe et al., 2020; Solone et al., 2020), offering positive feedback to students, increasing the percentage of time teaching, and maintaining positive classroom management (Gage et al., 2018; Lopes et al., 2017).

Higher Education

As with K–12 online education, it is important for teachers in higher education online classrooms to be flexible when it comes to technology failures (Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020; Seward & Nguyen, 2019). One best practice is for teachers to model learning for students during times when technology is a challenge (Seward & Nguyen, 2019). According to Wilson (2018),

best practices for teachers in online higher education classrooms also include a blend of technology into instructional design and learning materials, use of technology to help fulfill course learning outcomes and assessment needs, use of technology to foster communication skills, and the development of a user-friendly web-based course. Other literature suggests the importance of providing students with opportunities to produce authentic work that includes critical thinking and reflection (Darling-Aduana, 2021; Stupnisky et al., 2018), providing clarity during instruction, offering clear and timely feedback to students, and facilitating student collaboration (Lewis, 2021; Stupnisky et al., 2018). Certain practices known as High Impact Educational Practices (HIPs) have also been identified in the literature as best practices (Jenkins, 2021; Kuh, 2008; Linder & Hayes, 2018).

HIPs are used to increase student success, retention, and engagement in higher education (Jenkins, 2021). George Kuh (2008) was the producer of the seminal work that identified several HIPs to include: common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, ePortfolios, community-based learning, research, diversity/global learning, internships, undergraduate research, and capstone projects and courses (Jenkins, 2021). Because of the demand for high-quality online programs at the higher education level, adaptation of HIPs as applicable in an online environment is critical for student success.

Many jobs in the U.S. now require a postsecondary degree (Linder & Hayes, 2018). The demand for high-quality higher education degrees is increasing, and critical thinking skills, such as decision-making and communication skills, are in demand. Given the increase of students seeking education in an online format, high-impact practices are crucial strategies for student success and need to be implemented in online classrooms. Though much research has been

conducted on HIPs, little research has been conducted regarding how these practices may be modified and implemented in online education (Jenkins, 2021). However, Linder and Hayes offered strategies for integrating HIPs into online classrooms.

Teacher Support

In any profession, professional burnout can occur as a result of stress at work combined with a lack of support and resources (Baker et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2016). Teacher attrition is an international problem (Kelchtermans, 2017; Perryman & Calvert, 2020; See et al., 2020; Zavelevsky et al., 2021) that impacts sociological, economical, and public health issues of communities (Kelchtermans, 2017). In the U.S., the rate of novice teachers leaving the profession within the first five years is over 20%, and up to 40%–50% in some areas (Ryan et al., 2017; See et al., 2020; Zavelevsky et al., 2021). Perryman and Calvert shared data collected from a survey of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) alumni database which showed that two of the most common reasons cited by teachers for leaving the teaching profession were workload and lack of work/life balance, which were in alignment with other studies conducted on the issue (Kelchtermans, 2017; See et al., 2020). Additional reasons rated high on the list included feeling undervalued, target-driven culture, government initiatives, and lack of support from management (Kelchtermans, 2017; Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

Teachers need support from governing entities as well as administration to obtain the skills and resources needed to plan and work efficiently in classrooms (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Literature shows that they also need to be treated as professionals, rather than performers in education who are constantly asked to spend an unreasonable amount of time directed toward assessments, exams, progress measures, and professional accountability, as compared with the more relational, creative, and individualistic aspects of the job. Not only are teachers who are

supported more likely to persist as educators than are teachers without support (Kelchtermans, 2017; Zavelevsky et al., 2021), teachers with suitable training in knowledge transfer to students, creation of proper learning conditions, facilitation of collaborative learning, and formation of a classroom community are set up properly to provide quality education (Kalin et al., 2017; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

All teachers need support, but as online education becomes more prevalent, it is especially crucial that stakeholders consider how to support OT effectively (Davis et al., 2019). An investment in teachers is also an investment in students (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2015). Professional development and development of positive educator culture at the school level are two means of support (Daniels et al., 2020; Gul et al., 2019; Wijaya et al., 2020) that may benefit teachers and lend to the success of online educational programs.

Professional Development

It is difficult for teachers who lack training to perform successfully, and most teachers have not been trained in the nuances that online education presents (Baker et al., 2021; Farmer & West, 2019). For example, literature shows that many teachers lacked digital competency to successfully navigate online classrooms during the transfer to eLearning that occurred at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Middleton, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). Challenges for teachers result in challenges to student learning (Rasmitadila et al., 2020), which ultimately serves as a foundational reason for why appropriate professional development should be provided to all teachers. For technology to be effectively integrated, teachers must be knowledgeable of technology and pedagogy (Arslan-Ari, 2018; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). Not only is technology constantly changing, but teachers who have a low self-efficacy regarding technology are less likely to look for appropriate ways to incorporate technology

throughout instruction, which is essential for online learning (Burdina et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2019; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Though online platforms have provided opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development, little is known about teacher perceptions of their own online learning, what they prefer related to online professional development, or how online professional development is utilized by teachers (Parsons et al., 2019). The need for teachers to integrate instructional technology into teaching practices on a regular basis has increased with the technological advancements of the 21st century (Avci et al., 2019). Literature shows the importance of support for teachers offered by peers and administrators through mentoring and professional development opportunities related to technology skills, building self-efficacy, and technology integration in the classroom (Burdina et al., 2019; Callahan, 2017).

Some characteristics of traditional classroom experiences are similar to those of online classroom experiences, but operational differences exist between the two (Martin et al., 2019; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). OT would benefit from training specific to their needs (Martin et al., 2019; Short et al., 2021). For example, many of the BL studies that have been conducted in recent years focus on the in-person side of instruction, rather than how teachers may develop facilitation of BL skills on the remote learning end of instruction (Short et al., 2021). In addition to training on resources available for use in a BL classroom, it might be beneficial for teachers who teach in BL classrooms to receive training to include competencies related to BL research/theory, BL practices, and implementation of BL.

It is common knowledge that fostering collaboration, motivation and student-engagement that has resulted in positive student-achievement has come easier to some teachers than to others, which is why offering appropriate professional development opportunities specific to the

nuances of teaching online is critical as support for OT (Davis et al., 2019; Saqlain et al., 2020). Research has shown that feedback is crucial in developing expertise, though it is often infrequent in teacher preparation programs and professional development trainings (Prilop et al., 2021). According to the literature, training must take on a different dimension depending on departments, subjects, and individual knowledge of teachers (Davis et al., 2019).

Educator Culture at the School Level

The culture of any work environment affects the state of its employees (Bryant-Smith & Beard, 2018; Shareski, 2016; Wijaya et al., 2020). Educator culture encompasses the behaviors and attitudes of teachers, and may be more powerful in influencing the overall success of an educational program than any plan set forth by the administration of a school or school districts (Shareski, 2016). Culture permeates throughout every school and impacts the attitudes of students. Some literature shows that the creation of a positive educator culture at the school level is an essential means of teacher support.

Various studies have named principal's leadership as one of the main factors of teacher retention or attrition, especially regarding new teachers (Kelchtermans, 2017; Semarco & Cho, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Zavelevsky et al., 2021). Dealing with discipline issues, providing professional guidance, encouraging autonomy according to a teacher's ability and comfort level, and facilitating a positive school climate are all areas of support teachers have expressed needing (Zavelevsky et al., 2021). Not all principals have the same approach to guidance regarding the encouragement of socialization among staff, workload expectations, and/or support offered to teachers, but it is important for the administration to minimize gaps between the conditions they would like to provide and what is actually reality in their school. Just as the classroom environment is key to student success, the school environment is key to teacher success (Thomas et al., 2020; Zavelevsky et al., 2021). Literature has shown that facilitation of communication

between new teachers and more experienced teachers is also a positive means of teacher support (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Zavelevsky et al., 2021). Overall, studies show that teachers are more inclined to persevere when they view school leadership as positive and effective (Zavelevsky et al., 2021). School leadership impacts overall teacher job satisfaction, which has been linked in research to the ability of teachers to remain and thrive in their profession (Thomas et al., 2020).

According to Dean Shareski (2016), the things we value are often those we measure, which typically applies to test scores and grades in education. A positive educator culture is one that includes more than accountability for grades, however. In a working environment, culture is affected by the morale and interpersonal relationships of its employees (Bryant-Smith & Beard, 2018). Teachers benefit from opportunities to collaborate with colleagues (Bryant-Smith & Beard, 2018; Wijaya et al., 2020), which includes sharing knowledge, problem-solving, building team-spirit, and vision-sharing for the development of their school program (Wijaya et al., 2020).

Summary

Literature confirms that online education has increased in its popularity and availability over the last decade in many parts of the world and that it is continuously expanding (Farmer & West, 2019; Page et al., 2021; Zhang & Lin, 2021). More and more, students and families are looking for flexible options regarding how to earn an education (Black et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Saqlain et al., 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic created a huge shift in education, as many people were forced to move from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms during a time of crisis (Anderson et al, 2021; Black et al., 2020; Chiu, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Middleton, 2020; Page et al., 2021; Pattison et al., 2021; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). Some results from that included: a heightened awareness of online education, increased

accessibility to online education (Black et al., 2020; Page et al., 2021), and increased software development and online platforms developed to support education (Page et al., 2021; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021).

Research indicates that interaction is a major factor that leads to success in traditional and online educational formats, thereby supporting the CoI theory used to guide this study, which recognizes the importance of epistemic engagement (Garrison, 2017; Garrison et al., 2010). Studies show that interaction opportunities and relationship dynamics between students and students and students and teachers are important and largely rely on the organizational climate of a classroom and school (Blaine, 2019; Kalin et al., 2017). This is particularly important since student achievement is impacted by the social and emotional health of students (Kalen et al., 2017). Literature also establishes a link between positive classroom management and positive student achievement (Al-Shammari, 2016; Gage et al., 2018; Lopes et al., 2017; Mkhasibe & Mncube, 2020).

Multiple studies show that the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers are somewhat different in online education than in face-to-face classrooms (Blaine, 2019; Farmer & West, 2019; Lemay et al., 2021; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). Though some cross-overs exist between face-to-face classrooms and online classrooms, OT need to be supported through appropriate training specific to online classrooms (Heafner et al., 2019; Prilop et al., 2021), just as students need to receive support from teachers that specifically relates to the online classroom (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Seward & Nguyen, 2019; Virata & Castro, 2019). The need for teachers to consider new ways to organize, prepare, deliver, and asses learning materials and instruction for online teaching is constant (Martin et al., 2019).

Though many studies have been conducted regarding online education in higher education, research that focuses on K–12 online education is very limited (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Heafner et al., 2019; Ye et al., 2021). More research is needed to further understand teacher perceptions related to fostering collaborative classroom environments and positive student achievement, as well as online teacher views on what supports are most helpful to them regarding resources and professional development. A gap exists in the literature pertaining to recent perceptions of teachers in the U.S. who have experienced success in their online classrooms, particularly at the elementary level. Specifically, few studies have examined the Col framework in relation to K–12 online educational settings. A goal of this study is to capture insights regarding online best practices for the benefit of teachers, administrators, and students by gaining an understanding of the perceptions of online elementary teachers who have successfully established presence in their online elementary classrooms as measured by positive student achievement and classroom cohesiveness. The dramatic increase in online K–12 education accounts for the urgent need for additional research to recognize positive, evidence-based practices in online learning (Heafner et al., 2019; Saqlain et al., 2020; Todd, 2020). This study will extend current literature related to online education and may provide implications for best practices in elementary online classrooms going forward.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of elementary school teachers who have established presence in online classrooms. This chapter starts with an explanation of the design methodology of this study, followed by a review of transcendental phenomenology, and then a discussion of participants, programs, procedures, data collection, analysis methods, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of this study. This chapter will end with a summary.

Research Design

Qualitative inquiry was the appropriate design for this study as it focused on the perspectives of teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms through interviews, documentation, and a focus group provided by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As is the case in qualitative research, I began with assumptions and used the theoretical framework guiding this study to help address the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences. I collected data, analyzed data, established themes, and created a written report on the findings of this study. Qualitative inquiry helped me address a gap in the literature for research of online elementary classrooms in the U.S. and gain insight from teachers who have experience teaching face-to-face as well as online. The hope was that implications for best practices would emerge, as well as an understanding of what supports might be beneficial for online elementary school teachers going forward.

A phenomenological research design was appropriate for this study since it examined shared experiences of participants related to a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) by gaining comprehensive descriptions from participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017) I needed to “be

completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). I thoroughly examined the lived experiences of the participants so I could have a clear understanding of the essence of the phenomena being studied.

Three main branches exist in phenomenology: transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and existential phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This was a transcendental phenomenological study since the methods I implemented in this study were in alignment with the transcendental phenomenological model, which is guided by certain commonalities of the other models. Specifically, I used a qualitative design and methodology, focusing on whole experiences rather than parts, searching for meaning, gathering descriptions through interviews, looking at data as evidence for scientific investigations, formulating questions and problems, and viewing experiences and behavior as integrated parts of the whole picture of each participant's experience.

The work of Edmund Husserl heavily impacted the transcendental phenomenological design, though other philosophers including Rene' Descartes, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Immanuel Kant were also contributors (Moustakas, 1994). The design, according to Moustakas, includes the processes of epoché phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences to explore multiple experiences related to a specific phenomenon. I incorporated these processes during the data analysis of this study.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and four sub-questions. The research questions are derived from the CoI framework.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of elementary teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms?

Sub Question One

How do online elementary school teachers foster student success through teacher presence?

Sub Question Two

How do online elementary school teachers foster a cohesive classroom environment through social presence?

Sub Question Three

How do online elementary school teachers foster student success through cognitive presence?

Sub Question Four

How do online elementary school teachers describe their professional development experiences?

Setting and Participants

Ensuring that the site for a research study would help the researcher better understand the essence of the phenomenon being studied was an important step in the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants hold the key to valuable information and insights for a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). The setting and participants of this study were chosen intentionally. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Site

Bluebrook is in the southeast region of the U.S. and has a population of 523,542,

according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Bluebrook County School District (BCSD) is the largest district in the state, serving over 75,000 students, and employing over 10,000 employees. BCSD is approximately 25% larger than the second-largest school district in the state and is two to three times as large as the average-sized school districts in the state.

Following the COVID-19 crisis that impacted education drastically in the year 2020, an online program was established to offer an alternative to face-to-face education to students and families in Bluebrook County. This setting was chosen for this study because of the large population of schools, students, educators, and families it represents, and the determination for the online program to continue beyond the worries of COVID-19. Selecting the Bluebrook County Schools Online Program as the setting of this study made sense since results from the study would be easily transferable to so many other online classrooms in the Bluebrook Online Program, but also for other school districts that may be considering starting online programs or continuing programs that have already started. Twenty-four thousand students in grades K–12 were registered in the online program at the start of the 2020–2021 school year. One state-certified teacher was assigned to each classroom, and one administrator was assigned to each grade level. In each classroom, a teacher and students were the only active participants, though administrators observed classrooms periodically. Instruction in this online program has primarily occurred synchronously at the elementary level.

Though online elementary education is not new to the U.S., forced eLearning that occurred in the spring of 2020 across the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused the majority of students, families, and teachers to experience online education, which they had not otherwise chosen (Baker et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2020; Wang, 2020). What resulted was that some people learned they prefer online education over face-to-face education

(Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; Saqlain et al., 2020). However, one challenge is that online learning has not been consistently successful for every K–12 online learner (Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020). Though participants of the study were all part of one online program, students and teachers from many schools were represented in the study, since the students in the online program stay enrolled in their assigned school and were then taught virtually through the online program during its first year. In the year that followed, this current school year, students representing diverse school zones across the school district were mixed to formulate online classrooms.

Participants

In a qualitative study, participants hold the information and insights (Patton, 2015). I used purposeful sampling to determine participants, which means I sought a specific group of people who have all experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2015). 12 participants were initially selected based on their ability to inform an understanding of the research problem and general phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017), though one dropped out of the study due to health issues All participants for this study live and work in the same state and are state-certified teachers who transitioned from face-to-face instruction to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic and then were hired to work in the Bluebrook Online Program for the 2020–2021 and the 2021–2022 school years. State certification ensured that all teachers had at least two years of teaching experience. Participants were required to speak English and be over the age of 18 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I sampled with maximum variation to ensure diversity in gender, age, and ethnicity (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Researcher Positionality

As a qualitative researcher, I bring a research paradigm to help guide my study. My experiences as an educator have impacted what I believe about education and how I view others in educational environments (Patton, 2015). Additionally, I bring certain philosophical assumptions that will influence my study.

Interpretive Framework

The paradigm that guides this study is social constructivism, sometimes referred to as interpretivism, as it allows researchers to understand information authentically through a real-world work environment (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A social constructivist framework seeks to develop subjective meanings of varied experiences in an effort to construct the meaning of a situation. When applying a social constructivist framework, I needed to recognize my own interpretations and biases (see Appendix I) and position myself to acknowledge that findings represented personal interpretations.

My primary motivation for conducting this study was the desire to understand the experiences of teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms. I wanted to understand how to help them, other teachers, and the students participating in an online program in our school district going forward. I have been an educator for nearly 20 years, and have taught multiple grades at the elementary level in face-to-face classrooms. I have also been an adjunct instructor for a local university for three years, which has been fully online. At the time of this study, I worked at the central office of our local school district as a teacher trainer and evaluator, which afforded me inside information when all the schools were scrambling to move to an eLearning format in March of 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The online program with which each of the participants of this study was involved was developed by the school district where I work in an effort to offer continued online learning to students by way of fully online classrooms, as opposed to the hybrid classrooms that evolved once restrictions were lifted at the state level and students were allowed to return to face-to-face classrooms. Since the fully online program began, we have heard extensive feedback from administrators, parents, and students, but the voices of teachers have not been so apparent. Perhaps that is due in part to the heightened workload teachers have experienced since the COVID-19 pandemic, in both face-to-face and online classrooms (Baker et al., 2021). I was interested in focusing on the voices of teachers who have transitioned to online classrooms and established presence to learn about their experiences and what they have learned so far in the journey. I am a teacher at heart, and believe that the success of the online program going forward will be heavily impacted by the perceptions and involvement of teachers.

Philosophical Assumptions

As a qualitative researcher, I bring certain philosophical assumptions that will influence my study. These assumptions act as a lens through which I view the world and approach my research. My assumptions are ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

Ontological Assumption

An ontological assumption refers to the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher and participants of a study offer multiple perspectives of reality, and the researcher gathers different perspectives as themes develop throughout the study. My primary ontological philosophical assumption is that I believe in the existence of one reality, God's truth (John 14:6). In this world, the experiences of people are imperfect, however, which results in varied perceptions of reality. Because of our imperfections as humans, perspectives of reality are often

subjective, and multiple perspectives are important to point research closer to the truth of a situation. For that reason, I chose participants for this study who were taken from a large school district representing multiple different schools, grade levels, and perspectives.

Epistemological Assumption

An epistemological assumption addresses what knowledge is, how knowledge claims are justified, and the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017). When considering the epistemological assumption related to qualitative research, it is especially important that the researcher gets as close as possible to participants in the study. Specifically for this study, my epistemological assumption was that the descriptions of experiences offered by participants served as the primary sources of knowledge. I collected and analyzed data using methods specific to qualitative research and attempted to minimize the distance between myself and the participants to fully understand their experiences and report them accordingly. On a grand scale regarding epistemological assumption, I operate from the position of a Biblical worldview, and so believe that the primary source of guidance toward truth is spiritual in nature (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, John 8:32). I look toward scripture, prayer, and what is revealed to me in due time as indicators of knowledge and truth.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption that characterizes qualitative research is that all researchers bring certain values to a study, but it is especially important in qualitative research that a researcher makes his or her own values known (Creswell & Poth, 2017). My perspective is that all students deserve the opportunity to be educated, and that leadership, collaboration, and personal ownership are crucial in education. I have been an educator for the majority of my adult life, and so hold opinions about teacher and student responsibilities. I value education and the

idea that all children have a right to be educated (Parke & Elder, 2019), and that education that happens in the early years serves as an important foundation for future education (Brown et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020).

Researcher's Role

I served as the human instrument in this study (Creswell, 2007), as I collected and analyzed data for it. It was necessary for me to bracket my experiences in order to reduce my own "assumptions, beliefs, and biases" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). I bracketed out my experience as an adjunct online instructor at a local university, my employment at BCS, and my previous understandings of best practices in teaching, having experienced many years as a face-to-face classroom elementary school teacher. I have no working relationship with any of the participants. The commonality we share is that we are all BCS employees.

Procedures

Moustakas (1994) details the transcendental phenomenological research design as a step-by-step guide. Steps to the phenomenological approach include topic selection, conducting a literature review, establishing criteria, informing participants about details of the study, developing interview questions, conducting, recording, and analyzing interviews, and organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing data to reflect the essence of the study.

I requested and received site permission from the BCS Department of Accountability & Quality Assurance, which confirmed their willingness to participate in my study (see Appendix B). This study was conducted after receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB) of the research institution (see Appendix A). After developing the questions for data collection, I asked experts in the field, my committee members, to review the questions.

I used a combination of purposeful sampling and maximum variation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to select teachers from the BCS Online Program to represent first–fifth grades, in an effort to help me understand the problem and research question best (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was an appropriate combination of approaches for phenomenology because it focused on multiple individuals experiencing a common phenomenon while increasing transferability by using maximum variation sampling to document variables among participants, such as gender, age, and ethnicity (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). The selection was based on student achievement and administrator recommendations from the 2020–2021 school year. Each potential participant was sent an invitation (see Appendix C), a consent form (see Appendix D), and a questionnaire which was used to gather professional and demographic information (see Appendix E).

Once the completed consent forms and questionnaires were received from the participants, I contacted each selected participant to schedule an interview (see Appendix F). I critically reviewed the transcription of my first interview and sought immediate feedback from my first participant to provide credibility of the interview protocol. I made minor changes to interview questions that did not change the substance of the interviews. Each participant received a transcription of his or her interview as a member check to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

In addition to interviews, which are the primary data sources in a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994), I also gathered data through documentation and focus groups. I triangulated the data by comparing evidence of all three data sources to identify common themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Member checks were used to ensure the

accuracy of the transcripts for focus groups, just as was done with interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994).

I conducted a thorough analysis of the data I collected. I applied epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and structural-textural synthesis as is suggested by Moustakas (1994) regarding phenomenological research. I considered my own personal biases and bracketed them (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994) (see Appendix G). I created a strong textural description of the essences of the phenomena through the utilization of phenomenological reduction, and I used imaginative variation to construct structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994) of the experiences of teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms.

Permissions

Permission to conduct the research for this study is represented first by the IRB approval letter (see Appendix A). I also received site permission (see Appendix B). Finally, a copy of the consent form sent to participants in the appendix has been included (See Appendix D).

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool for this study included BCS elementary OT from a variety of schools who have been identified due to the demonstration of positive student achievement and cohesive classroom environments, based on internal evaluations and student assessments. In qualitative research, it is important to collect extensive detail about each individual studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I distributed a questionnaire to obtain general demographic information via email. Results from the survey allowed me to ensure maximum variation of grade levels taught, years of experience, age, and ethnicity of participants. In addition to demographic information, the

questionnaire included questions about personal and institutional goals, and a question that asked if the candidate would be interested in participating in the study if selected.

According to Moustakas (1994), the number of participants for a phenomenological study is unknown until a level of saturation has been reached. The number of teachers in the pool remained unknown until permission was granted from the site to gather specific statistical information and questionnaires were returned, to allow for saturation of the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). The number of participants was known once the data collected no longer produces fresh insight (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample size was 11 teachers, which allowed for one to four representatives from each elementary grade level, excluding Kindergarten. Informed consent was collected from each participant prior to data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection Plan

A rigorous application of a variety of data collection strategies and approaches was administered in this study. I detailed the sources of evidence, discussed the data collection approach, and explained why I chose the sources and sequence, per the recommendations of established qualitative researchers in the field (Moustakas,1994; Patton, 2015). After discussing the data collection approach, I discussed the associated data analysis approach I used for each data collection method. The sources of evidence I used for this study included interviews, documentation, and a focus group, which are all appropriate sources for phenomenological studies, according to Moustakas. Since interviews are primary for data collection in a phenomenological study, individual interviews were the first data collection approach. I then collected documentation from participants to confirm interview responses and look for evidence of teacher, social, and CP in the online classrooms, according to the CoI framework guiding this

study. I conducted the focus group last so themes that emerged from interviews and observations could be further developed and explored.

Individual Interviews

Interviews are an important and effective means by which information may be gathered in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). After results from the initial questionnaires and signed consent forms were received, emails were sent to participants to request a personal interview with each. I used an interview guide (see Appendix H), which allowed me to revise questions as the study took shape. The following questions were generated from and grounded in the literature on my topic and are in alignment with the CoI framework. Questions were constructed to elicit feedback about each participant's experiences related to establishing presence in online classrooms after transitioning from face-to-face education to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview question was reviewed by an expert in the field. I adjusted questions per the feedback received from the expert and added extra questions as needed. I implemented the interview protocol when conducting the interviews. The protocol included using a header to allow space for important information about the project, placing space between all questions on the protocol form, memorizing all interview questions and the order of them, writing out closing comments, thanking each individual for participation in the interview, and requesting any follow-up information, if needed. In addition to that, I critically reviewed the conduct of my first interview and sought feedback from my first participant to strengthen the credibility of the interview protocol and make any needed adjustments before continuing the interview process.

As is recommended for qualitative research, all interviews were recorded (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I transcribed each recorded interview verbatim, with permission from the

interviewees, to allow the raw data to be analyzed. Interview recordings via Zoom were stored on a hard drive for the duration of the study. I sent a copy of each interview transcription to each corresponding participant to give him or her an opportunity to verify or clarify the transcription of the interview. Through this method, a member check was in action, which heightened the reliability and credibility of the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Individual Interview Guide

Interview questions included:

Opening Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself. For example, where did you grow up, how long have you been teaching, what grades have you taught, and where?
2. What is one of your favorite aspects of being a teacher?
3. What is one of your least favorite aspects of being a teacher?
4. How would you summarize your teaching experience so far?

Questions Related to Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching

5. Please walk me through your experience transitioning from face-to-face instruction to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. CRQ
6. What caused you to decide to continue to teach in an online classroom, even after students and teachers were permitted to return to brick-and-mortar classrooms? CRQ
7. What benefits and challenges have you noticed about online education compared with face-to-face teaching? CRQ
8. What technology tools have been regularly implemented in your online classroom? CRQ
9. Please describe the typical daily routine in your online classroom. CRQ

Questions Related to the Online Elementary Classroom

10. How do you foster student collaboration? SQ2
11. What methods have you implemented to develop a sense of community in your classroom? SQ2
12. How do you ensure involvement from students during class activities and discussions? SQ2
13. What has been your experience regarding familial involvement in your online classroom? SQ2
14. Please tell me about measures you have taken to develop rapport with your students and their families. SQ2
15. What advice would you offer to new online classroom teachers related to the importance of social presence in an online classroom, based on your experience? SQ2
16. How have you established teacher presence in your online classroom? SQ1
17. What steps have you taken to make sure students are aware of your willingness to help them? SQ1
18. Please describe your availability to students. SQ1
19. What has your experience been with student achievement since teaching online? SQ3
20. What methods have you implemented to encourage positive student achievement in your classroom? SQ3
21. How are students held accountable for their work in your classroom? SQ3
22. What professional development tools have or have not been helpful to you as an online teacher? SQ4

The interview questions used in this study were designed and organized to fully capture the phenomenon of teachers establishing presence in online elementary classrooms. Questions 1 through 4 are introductory questions. Questions 5 through 9 are designed to solicit the overall experiences of the participants related to classroom routines, technology, and the transition from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms. Questions 10-15 relate to developing classroom community in online elementary classrooms. It is crucial to understand how to foster interaction among students since this has been shown to be a key component to the success of online learners (Blaine, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020). Questions 16-18 address TP in the classroom. TP is what brings "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). Questions 19-21 relate to CP and seek to understand the methods used to help students experience academic success in online elementary classrooms. CP refers to how learners construct meaning, which is essential to critical thinking (Blaine, 2019). The last question was asked for the purpose of understanding what supports have been beneficial to online elementary teachers and which have been lacking, according to the participants.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data collection was analyzed using a phenomenological process outlined by Moustakas (1994). The process includes epoché, phenomenological reduction employed by incorporating horizonalization, clustering and thematizing horizons, and developing individual textural descriptions of the experiences of participants (see Appendix I). Possible meanings and structural qualities were identified through imaginative variations to create individual structural descriptions that led to a composite description of the essences of the whole group.

I began the epoché process by considering my position and association with the school district and participants involved in the study, as well as my experience as a teacher in prior years. I avoided filtering information through my own perspective by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis processes of this study (Ahern, 1999). To successfully implement epoché, it is important to eliminate previous suppositions to allow for the generation of new knowledge to occur (Moustakas, 1994).

To employ constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) when looking at the transcripts, I conducted open and axial coding. I first analyzed each transcript to determine an initial set of codes and assigned conceptual labels. As concepts are repeated, they became themes (Saldaña, 2016). I also looked for horizons. To do that, I eliminated any repetitive, overlapping, or vague expressions and looked to what remained as the invariant constituents of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). After identifying the invariant constituents, or horizons, I labeled any recurring themes and clustered them together to form categories as part of axial coding (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding allowed me to identify concepts that were not fully supported and determine whether to disregard the data or gather more data. A primary goal of axial coding is to achieve data saturation and make sure all key information surfaces during coding. I used the information gathered through coding and horizonalization to help create focus group questions for a later time.

Documentation

The second data collection tool I used in this study was documentation, which is an acceptable data source for a phenomenological research study according to Creswell and Poth (2017). Documentation can serve as a strong data source by providing context, suggesting further questions to be asked, providing supplementary research data, providing a way of tracking

development, and verifying evidence (Bowen, 2009). Each participant was asked to provide documentation to represent a way he or she establishes social, cognitive, and TPs in his or her classroom (see Appendix J). The documents served as support and corroboration for interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, I examined the documents in search of common themes that helped me gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants. I also looked for themes that pointed toward best practices related to establishing social, cognitive, and TPs in online classrooms as support for research questions.

Documentation Data Analysis Plan

I performed document analysis to interpret documents and give voice and meaning to the experiences of the participants in this study. In document analysis, a systematic procedure is used to analyze documentary evidence which requires repeated review and examination of the data, including skimming, reading, and interpretation (Bowen, 2009; Frey, 2018). As with the methods used to analyze transcripts from interviews, I incorporated coding content into themes through the use of open and axial coding methods. Documents can verify or expand on the findings from other data sources when used in triangulation, which decreases bias.

Focus Groups

In an effort to verify themes recognized from data collected during interviews and implement a form of member checking, I conducted a focus group of four participants who represented multiple grade levels in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Focus groups provide a space for collaboration among participants, at which time they have the opportunity to expand previous comments or add to the comments of others when describing perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Another benefit of focus groups is that they provide an additional mode of interaction between the researcher and participants.

I used the focus group as a source of triangulation for individual interviews and

documentation and developed focus group questions based on themes derived from participant responses during interviews (see Appendix K). Triangulation of data involves using multiple methods of data collection regarding the same phenomenon to increase understanding and improve reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2017, Moustakas, 1994). Data collection from the interviews and documentation were additional components of the triangulation. I obtained permission from participants to record and transcribe the focus group, and participants were once again able to conduct member checks by reviewing and verifying the transcripts.

Focus Group Questions

The focus group guide included the following questions:

1. Please introduce yourselves.
2. What are some noticeable outcomes or behaviors of a cohesive classroom environment in online education?
3. How does the role of a teacher impact student success in an online classroom as opposed to just posting videos or assignments for students to complete online?
4. Let's talk further about some ways students are able to demonstrate critical thinking in a online setting.
5. Several have expressed the importance of parental involvement in general, but especially when his/her child is in a online classroom. What does that look like?
6. Professional development was a hot topic in this study. Will you clarify what is and is not important to you related to supports you believe to be needed as an online teacher?

The value of the focus group questions was to encourage participants to expand on comments and responses of others, which offered meaningful data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I also sought to gain a deeper understanding of answers to the research questions for this study,

especially of SQ4, which involves the support the participants have received as OT and what they have felt has been lacking.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I first began the epoché process by setting aside pre-judgments of my own and made every effort to be open to findings (Moustakas, 1994). I used complete transcriptions to analyze the data by incorporating horizonalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing of invariant constituents, application validation, individual textural descriptions, individual structural descriptions, and a composite description of the essences of the whole group, and I coded the focus group transcripts in the same format that data for interviews and documentation was analyzed in this study.

Data Synthesis

In a phenomenological study, the primary goal of the researcher is to understand a specific experience, or phenomenon, by accruing information from people who have lived the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). To obtain the best understanding of the data collected, the researcher must analyze the data by identifying central themes and the fundamental structure of the experience. I analyzed the data for this study by employing selective coding to identify the most prevalent categories or common themes in order to obtain an overall understanding of the studied phenomenon. After data collection and a thorough analysis of each source, I synthesized the data by providing textural and structural descriptions of the shared experiences of the participants (see Appendix M).

Textural-structural synthesis is the final stage in Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological research design, and the purpose of it is to capture "the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (p. 190). I wrote a rich and detailed description of the

experiences of elementary teachers who have established presence in their online classrooms in an online program that was created during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trustworthiness

It is important that a research study be trustworthy. Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, and is an essential component of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Specific measures were taken to address each of these components in this study.

Credibility

The *truth* of a study's findings or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality substantiate credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Rockinson-Szapkiw and Spaulding (2014), credibility is synonymous with internal validity and can be employed through triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and conducting member checks with participants. For this study, I employed triangulation and member checks. I also offered thick, rich descriptions of data collected in this study and analyzed the findings to provide accurate information related to the experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Transferability

Transferability means that the findings of one study are applicable to others if the same criteria are met (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, studies are verifiable rather than reproducible (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For this study, I thoroughly described the data, criteria, and setting so other researchers could decide if transferability would be applicable. I sampled with maximum variation by collecting data from online elementary teachers representing a variety of grade levels, from diverse school zones

throughout a school district, and I processed each statement offered by participants with equal value (Moustakas, 1994).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and repeatability of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This may be demonstrated by explicit descriptions of the procedures implemented in the study. In an effort to show that the findings of my study are consistent and could be repeated, I provided clear descriptions of the procedures carried out in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An inquiry audit was conducted to describe the research process throughout the study, as an additional means of establishing dependability (see Appendix L). The audit was conducted by the qualitative research director and the dissertation committee. In addition, I created an audit trail to describe the types and dates of interactions with participants throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Confirmability

Confirmability is another component of trustworthiness. It represents the degree to which the results from the study can be confirmed as true (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking and triangulation were key methods of ensuring confirmability in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). I confirmed the accuracy of interview and focus group transcriptions through member checking (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were given a copy of the transcripts from interviews and focus groups to confirm validity or clarify misconceptions. Member checking was important because it ensured that my interpretations of answers and comments provided by participants were correct. Triangulation of data was employed throughout the study to establish credibility. I compared evidence from interviews, documents, and the focus group to

establish themes, which was an ongoing process throughout the study and is considered an appropriate means of establishing credibility in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

A variety of ethical considerations were addressed in this study. Confidentiality was one key ethical consideration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To address this, pseudonyms were used to replace the location, program name, and names of the participants. Another ethical consideration was to "respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of" the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 207). To do this, research objectives were articulated verbally and in writing in a clear manner. Next, all participants provided signed consent, and IRB and site approval were granted before interviews or data collection occurred. Transcriptions of data collected through interviews and focus groups were provided to participants. All paper data, such as field notes, were stored in a locked cabinet. Electronic data, such as informed consent forms, the demographic questionnaire, and transcripts, were stored on a personal password-protected computer to which only I had access. When reporting the data, the best interests of the participants were considered. If I do not plan to add to the data collected for the current study, data will be stored securely and then destroyed after three years.

No considerable risks existed to participants in relation to participation in this study. Participants may see participation in this study as beneficial, however, since they were given the opportunity to contribute to the existing body of literature on the topic, helped formulate possible implications for future best practices in online education and contributed to the education profession as a whole.

Summary

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study intended to understand the experiences of OT who have established presence in their elementary classrooms. The participants for this study were elementary school teachers who have established presence in online classrooms. All participants currently teach in an online setting. After gaining IRB and site approval, as well as participant consent, data collection occurred through interviews, questionnaires, documentation, and a focus group.

Triangulation was employed to protect the trustworthiness of the study. Thorough descriptions of the data collected were used to increase transferability. A detailed log was kept to ensure that the study could be verified. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms for participant names and the site of the study (Creswell, 2006). No data collection occurred until approval was received from the IRB, site of the study, and participants. Data collection was stored securely.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of teachers establishing presence in online elementary classrooms. This chapter provides a description of the eleven elementary teachers in online classrooms who participated in this study. The participants are first described generally using the demographic information shared in the online questionnaire, followed by a table (see Table 1) which shows additional information from the questionnaire. The chapter also includes data gathered in the study in the form of narrative themes, charts, and graphs, presented by theme, outlier data, research question responses, and a conclusion.

Participants

One major criterion for choosing participants for a phenomenological study is that he or she has experienced the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). For the purpose of this study, the phenomenon was that all participants were in their second year teaching in a virtual learning program and had shown evidence of establishing presence in their elementary classrooms. All participants also transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To ensure maximum variation, this study consisted of eleven core subject teachers. Participants included one first-grade teacher, four second-grade teachers, two third grade teachers, two fourth grade teachers, and two fifth grade teachers. The participants came from the same online program in the same school district. Initially, one male and eleven females were selected and agreed to participate, though the male participant dropped out of the study due to personal health reasons.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Age Range	Grade Level
Christa	13	Masters	31 to 40	1st
Jodie	7	Master's Degree	21 to 30	2nd
Karrie	26	Bachelor's Degree	41 to 50	2nd
Heather	14	Doctoral Degree	41 to 50	2nd
Julie	15	Master's Degree +30	31 to 40	2nd
Bev	8	Bachelor's Degree	31 to 40	3rd
Vickie	7	Bachelor's Degree	31 to 40	3rd
Rebecca	16	Master's Degree	51 to 60	4th
Janice	16	Master's Degree	41 to 50	4th
Lynn	25	Doctoral Degree	51 to 60	5th
Kelly	9	Master's Degree	31 to 40	5th

Results

This study was guided by the following central research question: what are the experiences of elementary teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms? To reach maximum variation, teachers at varying elementary grade levels and years of experience were selected. I included the following supporting research questions to help me describe and understand the experiences of the participants: how do online elementary school teachers foster student success through TP, how do online elementary school teachers foster a cohesive classroom environment through SP, how do online elementary school teachers foster a

cohesive classroom environment through SP, how do online elementary school teachers foster student success through CP, and how do online elementary school teachers describe their professional development experiences. Throughout the interview and transcription processes, certain ideas or concepts were recognized as similar among participants, which initially led to open coding. Through open coding, categories of information were developed and examined. Axial coding was then applied, which connected categories to form possible themes. All forms of data collection were triangulated, and themes and subthemes emerged. The themes discovered in this study are as follows: (a) importance of student-to-teacher relationships, (b) interactive learning, (c) teaching virtually, and (d) desire for meaningful professional development.

Importance of Student-to-Teacher Relationships

Successful teachers recognize the importance of building positive relationships with students and research has shown that teachers who promote positive teacher-student relationships encourage autonomous motivation to learn (Mantzicopoulos et al., 2017). Not only does autonomous motivation lend to improved health and happiness in students, but also improved achievement (Ryan et al., 2017). Simple practices like greeting students and presenting oneself as a real human being with real gifts and talents as well as the ability to make mistakes have been noted as helpful to building student-teacher relationships. While literature has shown that establishing strong student-teacher relationships is important in face-to-face classrooms, the importance of student-teacher relationships also emerged as a substantial theme in this study of online instructors. Julie said, “One of my favorite aspects of teaching is just building those relationships with my students. If you can get the relationships down, then everything else student-wise and inside of the classroom should be a little bit more smooth sailing.” Rebecca added, “I think the number one thing in developing relationships is being human and showing

your humanness." Participants recognized the importance of being perceived as a real person as opposed to a figure on a screen. Jodie shared, "They only see your head on a screen, and they don't know your style, they don't know your persona … so anytime you have a chance, be intentional about allowing students to just talk about who they are and allow them to listen to who you are as well." Julie said, "I would focus on establishing those relationships first. If you don't have the relationship, nobody cares what you're saying." This study revealed that two means by which student-to-teacher relationships may be established in online classrooms are through teacher passion for helping students and teacher availability to students.

Teacher Passion for Helping Students

All participants of the study demonstrated a strong desire to help students. Several shared feelings of joy when witnessing a student breakthrough in understanding or mastery of a skill. Christa shared, "I really just love helping them to learn and watching them grow throughout the year." Another participant, Jodie, added, "I let students know that no matter what they come to me with, I'm not going to be judgmental. I'm not going to send them away. I'm always going to help them no matter the need." Some participants shared their perspectives on the importance of small group lessons for math, reading, and for remediation or enrichment. They shared what scheduling for that looks like and their excitement over finally being able to feel some sense of control over meeting with students more frequently in their online classrooms. For example, Jodie explained, "With things being so scheduled and routine, I feel like it's an excellent benefit to know that I have built-in-time into my schedule for that remediation or enrichment."

Evidence of passion for helping students was also seen in documentation provided by the participants in the form of schedules, lessons, activities, and assignments. In Bev's class, enrichment and remediation take place daily and were evident in the lesson plans she shared, for

example. She also provides Book Club opportunities for students and incorporates encouraging quotes into her daily slide presentations. Slides used to guide lessons were shared by multiple participants, and all were full of detailed information, creative visuals, and activities that were developmentally appropriate. Some slides were inserted to compensate for the teacher's lack of physical proximity to the student, such as ones that added specific directives of where to locate information and links to resources or activities. It was clear that participants implement their own passion for learning into the activities they plan for students, while considering student needs, interests, and perspectives related to the content taught.

Regardless of whether or not helping students was academically, emotionally, or socially related, all participants in this study appeared passionate about helping students grow, learn, and experience success. Jodie shared, "I feel really connected to my students … like I'm able to be a part of their lives. I love making those genuine connections with them and hearing their interests." Each participant's personal passion for helping students was evident as she reflected on her instruction and shared content she personalized beyond the curriculum.

Teacher Availability to Students

For teachers to be seen as present in the classroom or to develop relationships with students, they have to actually be present in some way, even if that is done virtually. Because OT are not able to provide a physical presence, they use alternative methods to be accessible to students, offer guidance and feedback, plan rigorous lessons, collaborate with colleagues, and develop rapport with students and families. Janice shared, "You are the leader. You're kind of the guide, but hold them responsible and be there for them." As an example of her availability to students during collaboration with each other, Karrie said, "I'm popping back and forth between the different breakout rooms." The majority of participants emphasized the importance of

consistency in a virtual classroom. For example, Lynn said, “I always keep my same schedule. The kids know when I’m available.” She described the importance of her being online early and making herself available during lunchtime in addition to being present for lessons and small group meetings with students throughout each day. Rebecca explained:

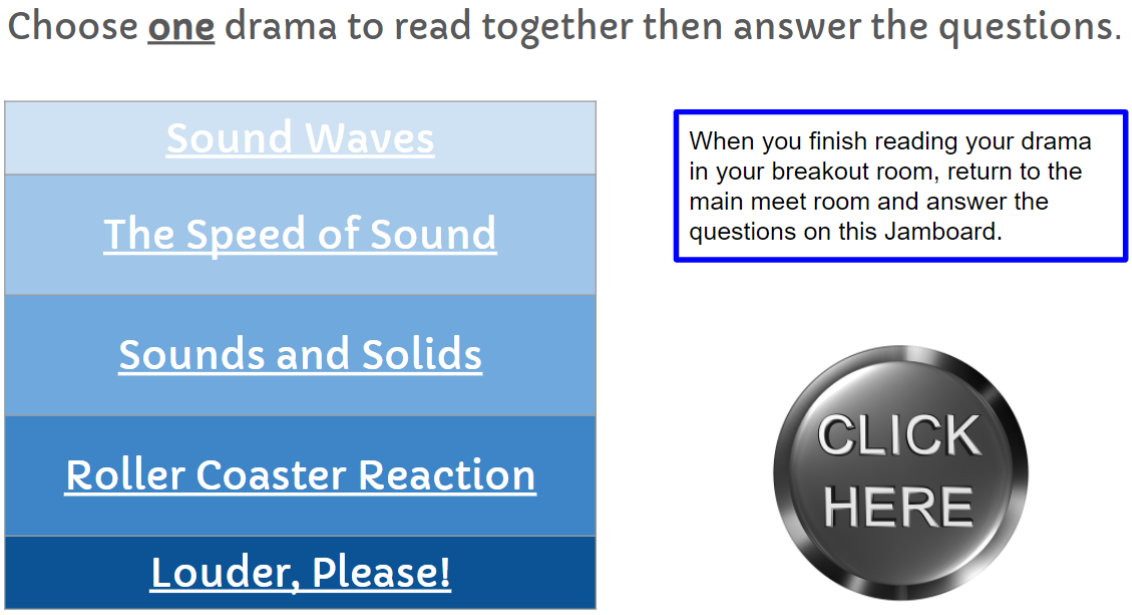
> I’m constantly trying to make myself available and giving them time. The ones who don’t want to take that time, I sort of tell them you have to come to this help session because once you get them there and get them working with you, then they’re successful a lot of times. I do feel like the time that I spend … they’re getting twice as much of me because I’m not divided into supervising everybody else in the classroom. I think I am more available.

Interactive Learning

All participants in the study indicated that successful online classrooms allow for immersive learning experiences and are comparable to face-to-face classrooms when it comes to students having opportunity for interactive learning. For the purposes of this study, interactive learning refers to student interaction with the teacher, other students, and content. In addition to discussions about interactive learning through interviews and the focus group, interactive learning was represented repeatedly through documentation provided by participants, often in the form of technology used, breakout rooms, or collaborative assignments among peers (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Visual Example of Breakout Room Assignment Shared as Documentation



Value of Student-to-Student Interactions

For a student to feel part of a classroom, it is important for him or her to be seen and known as an individual and to see and know others as well. Student-to-student interactions help them connect and become active members of a classroom community. All participants shared a variety of ways they encourage student-to-student interaction and collaboration in their online classrooms. For example, six out of 11 participants shared that they conduct Morning Meetings, as they had done in their face-to-face classrooms, at the start of each new day. The general consensus was that beginning each day in a unified manner helps to set a positive tone and gives students opportunity to interact and to be seen and heard. Janice explained, “We are doing all the things that foster classroom community and getting them to buy that this is a classroom community. We’re in it together.”

Breakout rooms are another tool participants routinely use to offer opportunity for small group work and student collaboration. All participants in this study use breakout rooms regularly as a method for students to be able to meet and work together. They are also used as a means for socialization, where students may go to visit. Karrie said, “We start at 7:45 with a Morning Meeting. Then I’ll split the kids up into breakout rooms and they can just hang out. Sometimes I’ll give them a topic to talk about.” In reference to using breakout rooms throughout the day in combination with lessons, she continued, “They may go into a breakout room where one of them may be presenting their screen and explaining something that they’re doing, or they could be working on their writing and talking about it, sharing ideas.” Some participants use breakout rooms to offer students a place to discuss a topic in a small-group setting that contributes to the learning of the class as a whole. For example, Rebecca shared, “They will meet to discuss something and then bring it back to the class and share.”

Making Connections

While teacher-to-student and student-to-student connections are valuable and strengthen the likelihood of student achievement, all participants agreed that a cognitive connection is necessary for students to be able to learn and apply their learning. All participants shared methods they use to encourage student interaction and participation with content material throughout lessons each day. Multiple forms of technology are integrated daily in each classroom to help engage students and help them connect with content. The most common interactive forms of technology mentioned by participants in this study included Google Classroom, Pear Deck, Flipgrid, and Jamboard. Jodie shared a screenshot of a Pear Deck session in which second-grade students were interacting on their own screens during a live lesson (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Screenshot of Students Interacting on Pear Deck

She shared that she would show vocabulary and model problems before asking students to then try on their own. Jodie explained, "As the teacher, I can see if students are grasping concepts, participating in the lesson, and adjust lesson pace based on student responses. Students had the same Pear Deck for their independent task with different problems." Janice shared a way she gave older students an opportunity to make connections with content. She explained:

> Students were introduced to the topic of Entomophagy and given a variety of articles and videos to analyze. Each student constructed their own opinion of entomophagy based on analysis of the sources. Opinion essays were then written with evidence from the sources as support. Throughout the project, students met in groups to discuss ideas and opinions in a respectful way.

In addition to guided lessons provided by the teacher in each classroom and assignments given, nine out of 11 participants pointed out the importance of student ownership in learning. When a student is intrinsically motivated to learn, he or she takes on some of the responsibility of making connections to content and applying what is learned in various situations. Particularly in an online environment where the teacher is not physically present to coax a student to remain

on track or monitor all student behaviors, personal responsibility to connect with the content, teacher, and peers on the part of the student is a key to success, according to participants.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is often beneficial to students in elementary classrooms, both face-to-face and online. In an online environment, many of the opportunities for parents to be present in the classroom are removed, but parents still play a vital role, and in some ways an even more necessary one, according to 10 out of 11 participants of this study. The primary responsibilities of parents in an online classroom involve logistics such as determining where a student will work and remain while class is in session, ensuring that a student has necessary supplies and attends online sessions, and following up with a student to make sure he or she has completed and turned-in work assignments. During individual interviews, five participants expressed the value of an online teacher creating a specific schedule with as few changes as possible so parents, students, and the teacher can all coordinate efficiently. Christa extended that thought when she said, “Virtual is not for everyone. As far as the parents, they need to be willing to help their kiddos get on a schedule, help them get in a routine, and kind of keep that routine going.” Julie explained that she needs parents to be parents. She said:

> There are certain things we need in a virtual learning environment and the parent needs to be involved because it’s a partnership. If the kid is watching TV all day and I’m teaching, well, yeah, they’re in class, but they’re not really in class because I’m here and they’re over there looking at the television. A parent needs to be involved … turn the TV off, let’s make sure you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. Let’s check to make sure the work you turned in was actually done.

Teaching Virtually

The eLearning that originally took place as an immediate reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020 looked very different than the current online classroom environments in which the participants teach, according to all participants. In reference to the initial eLearning days, Bev shared, “It was very rough at first … very, very rough.” She spoke of learning curves and every step being “learn as you go.” Kelly shared, “It was difficult to adjust because there was little to no information out there on how to do this with little kids. It was difficult trying to get them into the habit of doing things online.” She went on to say, “But once we got into the rhythm of things, it was a complete different (sic) thing because the students were able to do their work and complete what they needed to do … those that wanted to anyway.” In reference to current online learning, all participants expressed finding the quality of the online education offered in their classrooms currently either equal to or better than what they experienced in face-to-face classrooms.

Challenges

When asked about the challenges of being an elementary teacher in an online classroom, key answers of participants included the necessity of having everything prepared in advance without the ease of making immediate alterations if needed, lack of parent buy-in, difficulty monitoring student work, poor student supervision at home, more time spent planning and preparing for lessons, difficulty separating work life and home life, testing online, difficulty getting resources to students, and tracking down student work. Ten of 11 participants said they spend more time preparing for lessons as OT than when they taught in face-to-face classrooms because there are fewer resources and materials available to them in online formats than what is needed for daily instruction in an online classroom. In most cases, an online indicator is needed for every single activity or directive that happens throughout the school day. This presents a need

to create online resources used to guide students through instruction as well as links and slides that those students can navigate to complete assignments. In reference to poor student supervision at home, some participants shared examples such as students lying in bed, watching TV, or playing video games during class time without any correction or input from parents at home. In some cases, students did not appear to have designated workspaces, quiet environments, or necessary materials to complete assignments. In an online environment, the teacher has less control over such aspects of the classroom and students than a teacher would typically have in a face-to-face classroom, hence the necessity for parents to do their part in supervision of their children. Challenges said to occur less often included poor attendance of students and parents being more brutal in communication than they might be in a face-to-face encounter. Several participants echoed Jodie's statement when she said one challenge is, "making sure to be mindful of preparing students and providing lessons and activities that everyone can participate in online."

Benefits

All participants expressed appreciation for aspects of teaching in online classrooms that they see as benefits compared with their experiences teaching in face-to-face classrooms. For example, all participants acknowledged the decrease in classroom behavior issues and distractions. Jodie shared, "I have not had any issues with student behavior since being in the virtual program." Bev added:

> I feel like there are a lot of stressors that I left behind in brick and mortar. For example, classroom management. We have to set expectations in the virtual setting as well, but you don't have a lot of the interruptions like I used to have in brick and mortar.

Some other benefits named included not having to travel to work each day, being able to use the restroom or get a drink when needed, feeling safer because of the ability to avoid contact

with so many people during the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting student needs, and the ability to integrate technology skills on a regular basis that there was not always time to do in a face-to-face classroom. Feeling challenged as a teacher was another benefit named repeatedly by participants. For example, Christa explained, "It's not an easy task to teach virtually…finding ways of being able to teach them, giving them those hands-on experiences, giving them virtual field trips." She went on to explain that the newness of learning how to do all of those things in an online platform challenged her as a teacher and sparked a fire into her and her instruction. Rebecca said it in a different way when she stated:

> I really like the challenge and the creativity of being able to present things and engage kids through the computer. I was surprised, I guess, that you would have the chance to really form as strong of relationships as you do in person. It was almost shocking to me the first year that it worked out like I was hoping for, but I guess I was up for the challenge of trying to do that. And, I think that I'm good at figuring out technology. I think it was a strength of mine that I wanted to develop further.

Desire for Meaningful Professional Development

All participants noted that the professional development and support they need in an online setting is not identical to what was needed when they were in face-to-face classrooms. For example, use of technology has increased tremendously since making the transition from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms. Heather shared, "I'm always at the cutting edge of what's next and new." All participants expressed the desire to have professional development that actually helps them grow as professionals and improve best practices for students.

Helpful

Nine out of 11 participants found professional development related to specific programs related to technology they were asked to use in their classrooms generally helpful. Two of those

nine participants said they have not learned anything new to them; however, this was because they were already familiar with the programs. Professional development related to technology is still the clear choice of participants. According to Lynn, “Brand new program professional development is amazing because I need it.”

When the question of professional development was discussed in the Focus Group and a deeper discussion ensued, the participants expressed that the professional development they experienced came informally as well. Three out of four of the participants expressed appreciation for planning days that were built into the schedule on the previous year. Karrie explained:

> They gave us several days throughout the year where we worked together in our grade levels to plan. I would work with three other teachers and we could plan the next … however much we could get done in a day. That was extremely beneficial. I don’t think everyone necessarily understands that every single thing we do has to be planned. We can’t wing it in virtual. We have to have a presentation for the kids to look at. We have to have independent practice for them to do. That was really beneficial for us to have that time to plan that all out. The more we did it, the more we learned about what we were doing. The more we did it, we were like, hey, we need teaching slides. We need independent practice slides. We need all these different resources. I call that professional development because we learned from ourselves and each other and just having those days was extremely beneficial for us.

Participants explained that planning days were still considered school days but that lessons were provided for students to work independently on those days. Julie confirmed what Karrie said when she added, “Definitely, I agree with you 100%. I loved those days. It was great to be able to work with other teachers.” Christa concurred. She said:

> I think they were helpful. You can't wing it. You have to have everything ready ahead of time. I teach from a slide deck. I have my teacher slide deck, where I have pictures for the kiddos to look at of what we are talking about. You can't just say, oh, let me just find a math problem real quick. It has to already be done.

It is important to note that the one participant who did not express agreement with the other three on this issue did not disagree with having the extra planning days, but did not find working with multiple other teachers to plan as useful.

Frustrations

Frustrations shared by participants were mainly about receiving professional development that did not pertain to them or wasting time in meetings that were not meaningful or differentiated to their skill sets or knowledge levels. For example, Julie explained, "Some of it has dealt with brick and mortar. We sat through a professional development that had absolutely nothing to do with a virtual program. I'm in a virtual program. Give me something that I can take back for my class." During the focus group discussion, Rebecca added,

> It needs to be differentiated. We should be able to pick, like, there's going to be a Pear Deck 101 and a Pear Deck Advanced. You can decide which one you need to sign up for that makes the most sense. Some of the professional development we've gotten has not even been really relevant.

Outlier Data and Findings

Though COVID-19 was not the focus of the study, it directly relates to the topic since all participants in the study transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms during the pandemic, thereby making it an extension of the shared phenomenon of participants. COVID-19 also relates to the study because it was the cause of schools all over the country moving to eLearning in March of 2020 and the primary reason so many students, families, and

teachers were exposed to learning in a virtual platform, particularly at the elementary level. Unfortunately, many people equate organized online educational programs with the eLearning that occurred at that time, which is not an accurate understanding, according to the participants in this study and other recent research that has emerged in literature. Multiple methods by which participants were able to establish TP, SP, and CP in their online classrooms were presented in the study, contrary to the typical eLearning days of COVID-19. Three of the four participants in the focus group shared how different their online classrooms were compared with the eLearning days of COVID-19. Julie said:

> It's all about, it's all about relationships. You can't just record yourself teaching and expect everybody to, you know, get that good grade. It's all about building their confidence, building the relationship that you have with them and that they have with you and also with the parents. If everybody's working together and the relationship is blossoming, then that's when the academics can come in and people want to learn. They want to engage and try their best. If you are just posting a video … there's a disconnect and nobody's excited to come to school.

Julie and Daphne both described their online classrooms as rigorous, which was not the case with most situations of eLearning back in the spring of 2020, according to much of the literature surrounding the topic. COVID-19 emerged as an outlier because of its connection to eLearning.

Research Question Responses

The following section offers concise answers to the research questions posed in this research study, primarily using the themes and subthemes developed in the previous section. The answers are reflective of the perception of the majority or in some cases all of the participants. All forms of data were considered when determining answers for all questions.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of elementary teachers who have established presence in online elementary classrooms? The participants' overall perspective is that teaching in online elementary classrooms is both rewarding and challenging. All participants shared a growing confidence in their abilities to prepare materials for students, foster classroom community, and teach in online classrooms, and all acknowledged a vast difference between the current program and the eLearning that took place initially as a response to COVID-19. As is the case typically in face-to-face classrooms, participants agreed that the most successful online students are those who attend regularly, participate, take ownership of their learning by completing assignments and turning them in on time, and have parental support. All participants named reduced distractions, including fewer discipline issues during class, as one major benefit of teaching virtually.

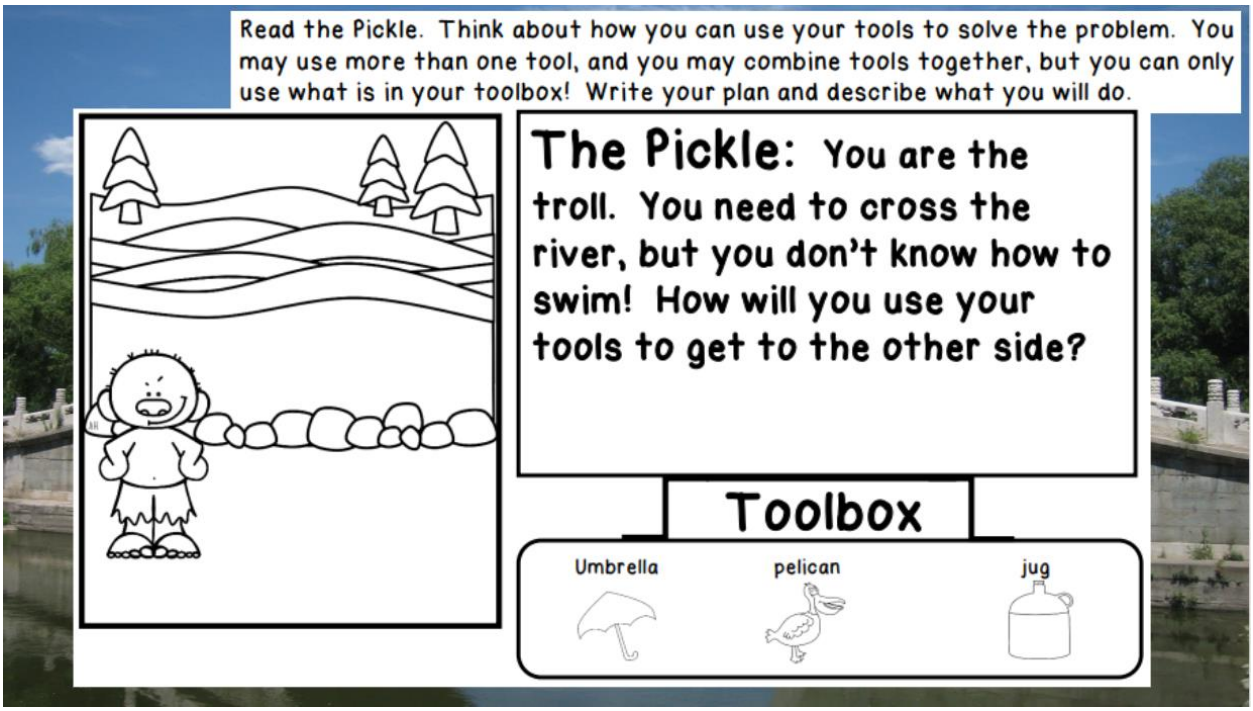
Sub Question One

How do online elementary school teachers foster student success through teacher presence? The nature of online education calls for TP since students need academic direction and feedback. The participants have fostered student success through TP by making themselves available to students and parents, establishing set schedules, designing and facilitating meaningful learning experiences for students, communicating expectations and content clearly, and by regularly providing feedback to students. Participants shared documentation to show examples of how they have facilitated educationally worthwhile learning outcomes through lessons and assignments in their online classrooms. For example, Heather demonstrated her presence through the design of a lesson she shared in which students were given a problem and a toolbox of possible items they could use to solve the problem (see Figure 3). Students were

asked to read the problem, think about which tools could be used to solve the problem, and write a plan to describe strategies used for the solution.

Figure 3

Example of Teacher Presence through Lesson Facilitation



All participants in the study work with at least one other colleague to develop plans that are worthwhile to students personally and educationally, which is also a form of establishing TP.

Sub Question Two

How do online elementary school teachers foster a cohesive classroom environment through social presence? All participants recognized extreme value in creating a trusting environment where students are able to identify as members of a classroom community. Karrie said, "It's important to make the students feel like they're a part of the classroom … to make them feel connected. To let them know that you see them as individuals." Participants shared examples of how to build a cohesive classroom including fostering opportunities for students to

develop inter-personal relationships, providing experiences through which students are able to project their individual personalities, and fostering student collaboration on assignments. The means by which these experiences happen are somewhat different in an online classroom environment compared with a face-to-face classroom environment. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, natural places for student socialization exist, such as at recess. In an online environment, if students are going to be social during recess, the teacher must create that space. Janice explained:

> I actually hold, most days, online recess with breakout rooms and it's the last 15 minutes of the day. They just go to their breakout rooms and they talk and hang out and get to know each other and how to mix it up. They look forward to that time.

Sub Question Three

How do online elementary school teachers foster student success through cognitive presence? CP is the extent to which learners are able to make meaningful connection to their learning. The participants described the necessity for students to construct meaning through exploration, reflection, and discourse. All participants shared examples of classroom activities or lessons which gave students opportunity to apply and/or explain their learning. Bev shared one way she has promoted CP in her classroom through use of book summaries and peer reviews. She shared:

> Students were asked to read a book together as a Book Club. They wrote a summary of the book. They were paired with a partner and wrote peer reviews. They also worked independently to create a Venn Diagram showcasing their knowledge of the book.

Documentation was provided as a source of data in this study to show the progression of the assignment and it was clear that students were given opportunity and encouraged to take ownership of and apply their learning throughout the activity.

Another participant, Rebecca, shared a lesson on inquiry that she developed and taught. Rebecca explained, “Students read different sources and determined the quality of the source and whether or not it would help to answer the big question.” This lesson was in response to previous lessons students had experienced based on primary and secondary sources.

Sub Question Four

How do online elementary school teachers describe their professional development experiences? Overall, participants seemed to understand the importance of professional development, particularly as it relates to specific technology they use in their classrooms. The majority of participants, however, shared some level of frustration with the lack of usefulness or practicality of the professional development that has been provided since transitioning from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms. For example, for a teacher to implement technology meaningfully, he or she must be comfortable with the technology. Vickie expressed appreciation at the school district’s willingness to try so many different technological applications as well as their willingness to do their best to help teachers. She added, “On the flip side of that, all these apps and all these programs are being provided not necessarily when we need them. We’re constantly adding stuff throughout the year and that’s a problem.” Ten out of 11 participants shared that the amount of applications they have been asked to use and monitor during professional development sessions or faculty meetings has been impractical.

Summary

This chapter first introduced the participants of this study, which included 11 female participants who all teach in online elementary classrooms. The themes that developed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach included importance of student-to-teacher relationships, t interactive learning, teaching virtually, and professional development. Significant statements were provided as support for themes. After describing each of the themes, I briefly discussed how the study addressed the central research question and each of the supporting research questions. Three of the four supporting research questions and answers aligned with the CoI framework and addressed participant experiences related to TP, SP, and CP. The fourth question and answer were related to participant experiences with professional development since becoming online educators. One important finding in this study was that all participants expressed that the quality of the online education offered in their classrooms has been equal to or greater than what they experienced as educators in face-to-face classrooms. They attributed the success, in part, to fewer interruptions, improved classroom management regarding student behavior, and the ability to stick to a schedule, thereby allowing for lessons to go as planned in most cases and consistent implementation of small-group instruction.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of elementary school teachers who have established presence in their online classrooms. The 11 participants who participated in this study all work in an online program that represents a diverse student population of elementary students spread out over a very large school district in the southeastern U.S. These teachers have a combined 159 years of experience teaching in an elementary school setting and all transitioned from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter presents a review of the research findings as well as a discussion of the findings in relationship to the literature, the theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations of the study, and suggestions for future research. A final summary will conclude the chapter.

Discussion

This section includes a concise summary of the findings of this study in light of the developed themes. Interpretations of findings are supported by empirical and theoretical sources as well as specific evidence from the study. Themes were derived based on data collected through interviews, documentation, and the focus group.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study expand upon the literature regarding experiences of elementary teachers who teach in online classrooms as well as literature pertaining to best practices in K–12 online education. This section begins with a brief summary of thematic findings as discussed in Chapter Four, followed by a series of interpretations of the findings. Inferences from the data, application of the CoI framework, and correlation with literature surrounding the topic have

helped to create my interpretations of the findings, as is customary in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Summary of Thematic Findings

My research was informed by the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2010) and focused on experiences of teachers who have established presence in their online classrooms accordingly. Key themes that emerged in this study include importance of student-to-teacher relationships, interactive learning, teaching virtually, and desire for meaningful professional development. In line with the CoI framework, the participants in this study showed evidence of facilitating learning in their classrooms through forming connections with students and helping students connect to each other and the content. One of the main findings of this study was that online elementary classrooms can be just as rigorous, interactive, and growth-oriented as face-to-face classrooms when certain best practices are put in place and implemented consistently by teachers and when students and parents demonstrate buy-in of the online program in which students are enrolled by upholding their established responsibilities and actively engaging in the online classroom experience (An et al., 2021; Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Farmer & West, 2019; Gulosino & Moron, 2017; Smith et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2021). This deduction came from the analysis of data collected from interviews, documentation, and a focus group discussion as well as research literature surrounding the topic. I was able to make a series of interpretations about the importance of relationships, effectiveness of online classrooms, and support needed for OT.

Importance of Relationships. Whether referring to face-to-face or online classrooms, relationships matter. In reference to elementary classrooms, relationships may include student-to-teacher, student-to-content, and student-to-student. To build a classroom community that works for everyone in an online classroom, a teacher must be very intentional in providing

opportunities for students to engage and learn with the teacher and each other (Solone et al., 2020). It was clear that participants in this study planned for teacher-to-student and student-to-student interactions daily, even though it often involved extra time and efforts in planning as well as adapting or creating resources that could be used in an online platform. Simple practices implemented by teachers such as greeting students and being authentic help build relationships in a classroom. Research has shown that positive student-teacher relationships encourage student motivation (Froiland et al., 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Mantzicopoulos et al., 2017) and motivation has been directly correlated with positive student achievement (Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017). By providing space for students to interact socially and collaborate through discussion, projects, and assignments, students may be known by the teacher and peers. I noticed that every participant stressed the importance of developing relationships with students and some specified the common belief that relationships needed to be in place before consistent or deep learning could occur. The participants of this study were able to provide tangible examples of ways they attempted to connect with students and parents, and it was clear that they valued the skill of relationship-building in themselves. Collaboration emerged as an essential component of an effective online classroom through data shared by the participants and through the literature (Heafner et al., 2019; Miller, 2021; Solone et al., 2020). Participants in this study emphasized that in face-to-face classrooms, students can simply turn and talk with each other, but in online classrooms, the teachers must create ways for students to do that through technology.

Effectiveness of Online Classrooms. Research on elementary online classrooms has been very limited (An et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019) and most of the research studies that have been conducted on K-12 online learning have focused on student performance comparing online classrooms with face-to-face classrooms, yielding mixed results

(An et al., 2021). Comparative studies are difficult in this situation, however, since they are comparing different students, teachers, and personal situations of each. Too many variables exist to be able to narrow results down to the learning platform being the greatest variable. Though classrooms of students were different, one reliable aspect of this study is that participants were comparing their own experiences in face-to-face classrooms with their own experiences in online classrooms, even in the wake of a global pandemic and a new online program, and found online learning to be just as effective when certain practices were implemented and when students and parents demonstrated buy-in. This supports the train of thought that the effectiveness of online learning is mostly impacted by individual nuances of who is teaching, who is learning, and what practices are used to accomplish that learning and less to do with the averages examined in comparative studies (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2015; Rice & Ortiz, 2021). This idea heavily correlates with feedback offered by the participants in this study as well as the CoI framework on which it is built, which stresses the importance of TP, SP, and CP in online classrooms (Garrison et al., 2010).

Several benefits to student enrollment in online classrooms have surfaced in the literature (An et al., 2021; Caskurlu et al., 2021). Some benefits include flexible learning opportunities for students who may not be able to attend school in face-to-face classrooms for whatever reasons, a more precise means of personalization and differentiation of academic content, accessible learning for all students, and a seamless flow of learning during unforeseen emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (An et al., 2021). Participants in this study expressed confidence in the effectiveness of their online classrooms and some shared that they believe they have accomplished even more with students in an online platform than in face-to-face learning due to fewer distractions, very precise planning, being able to stick to a set schedule, and experiencing

fewer behavioral issues during a school day. A main way for meaningful interactive learning experiences to occur in an online environment is through structure of lessons and activities carefully planned in advance. While that structure might require extra time in planning and preparing on the part of a teacher, it also increases the likelihood of accomplishing tasks and meeting goals. In addition, having students separated naturally from a whole-school environment negates many of the interruptions that sidetrack a teacher and students in face-to-face learning environments. Even interruptions such as announcements, noises from other classrooms, students in the same room, or people in the hall may interrupt instruction and impact learning. With exception to power outages, teachers in an online environment have more control over what activities happen during a school day than do teachers in face-to-face classrooms, thereby increasing opportunity for effective instruction to occur. The key is whether or not students are receptive to that instruction and committed to participating in class, completing assignments, and making connections to learning.

Some challenging aspects that may impact the effectiveness of online classrooms include lack of parental involvement, poor attendance of students, lack of face-to-face relationships which may negatively affect the sense of community in a classroom if other measures are not taken to encourage it, and lack of teacher training (An et al., 2021). The general consensus of participants in this study that was also in alignment with the literature was that, while it may be best for some students and teachers, online education is not effective for all (Anderson et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019; Kaden, 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021). Some students learn best in a face-to-face environment in close proximity to a teacher and other authority figures. For students who do not have support at home, a face-to-face classroom will likely be

more effective than an online classroom because of the in-person interactions and accountability that may be afforded in a face-to-face environment.

Support for OT. While crossovers exist between traditional classrooms and online classrooms, the support needed by teachers in both arenas is not necessarily identical (Tawfik et al., 2021). One benefit of this study is that the participants have all experienced roles as teachers in face-to-face classrooms as well as online classrooms. Having experience in both learning platforms adds credibility to insights shared by participants including their perspectives on professional development and other supports needed when working as online educators.

One major takeaway from this study was that online educators are typically spending even more time on planning since moving to an online platform than when they worked in face-to-face classrooms. In face-to-face classrooms, for example, technology is often used primarily as supplemental resources compared with being primary resources in online classrooms (Tawfik et al., 2021). This change alone requires additional time to plan lessons, become familiar with various technologies, and learn how to employ a multitude of technology options with deliberation and agency for the purposes of student engagement, enjoyment, and growth. Digital instructional materials designed for online spaces are often distinctly different than traditional instructional materials (Rice & Ortiz, 2021). Though digital tools may ultimately lighten the load for educators, the initial familiarization and implementation of the tools are time-consuming (Rice & Ortiz, 2021; Tawfik et al., 2021). Teacher awareness of and ability to use the tools are not the only issues in play. Most of the participants in this study consider themselves to be technologically savvy and some even mentioned the opportunity to use digital technology consistently in the online classroom as a benefit to teaching online. Still, beyond knowing the tools, OT are needing to be extra intentional in their utilization of the tools, in implementation of

them into daily lesson plans, and in creating and sharing additional resources with students to help them be able to navigate the tools. It may be wise for online program designers, administrators, and school districts to recognize this when considering professional development topics and planning time afforded to OT, as well as when choosing which digital tools to mandate, how many, and why.

Another common area of support noted in this study involved having necessary resources and being able to provide students with necessary resources as well. The biggest challenge that was mentioned regarding this issue surrounded the subject of reading. The classroom culture seems to look most different in reading in online classrooms compared with face-to-face classrooms at the elementary level, primarily because there is no actual classroom library or school library from which the teacher or students can pull books immediately in an online classroom. Distribution of resources to students in any subject is a challenge simply due to the barrier of physical proximity between teachers and students in an online environment. Logistics on how resources will be supplied to students and teachers as well as coordination of appropriate time frames are important consideration for school leaders to make when implementing an online program.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This study produced findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for educators, parents, school districts, and higher education administrators. While it is clear that students and teachers can be part of vibrant online classrooms where cognitive, social, and personal growth may occur in the online program in this study, it should be possible for other online programs as well. When appropriate supports are put in place, teachers and students are set up for success (Harper, 2018; Solone et al., 2020). One crucial component of elementary

online education is establishing a classroom community where relationships and accountability are present. This section focuses on implications for policy and implications for practice, guided by data collected and analyzed in this study.

Implications for Policy

Based on the findings of this study, there are several significant implications for policy. Policy is important because it impacts the daily practice of districts, administrators, teachers, students, and even parents. From this study, the implications for school district and higher education policies are notable.

Implications for School Districts. Two main implications can be derived from this study regarding school district responsibilities. First, if supporting an online program, school districts should plan for professional development specifically appropriate for online learning and online educators, recognizing that many of the day-to-day routines, resources available, and nuances in a face-to-face classroom are not applicable in an online setting (An et al., 2021; Avci et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Talakoub, 2020). All 11 participants supported the need for professional development that is relevant to them specifically as online educators. If resources are being provided to regular classroom teachers by designated academic specialists at the district level, for example, resources that are already online-ready should be provided to teachers in online classrooms. If teachers are required to attend training sessions, the training should be pertinent to their specific area of education, whether that be in face-to-face or online environments. As educators, we know the importance of differentiating instruction and it is no different when instructing teachers. In addition, the need for technology training that is differentiated according to teacher skill levels is imperative and sometimes less really is more. It is not practical or a good use of time and resources for OT to be subjugated to a large variety of technological applications

they are required to use and monitor in their classrooms, especially if professional development on such applications has lacked depth. Some best practices would be to focus on a few required applications for a school year, provide training on those applications early in the first quarter to those who need it or would like to have it based on their self-reported skill levels, and allow for teacher interest and creativity to navigate what other applications are implemented in their classroom instruction. Some suggestions for additional professional development topics based on my findings in this study include exploring ways to engage students in an online classroom, a brief overview of a variety of online tools or applications for primary and for intermediate grades separately, teaching testing skills in an online classroom, and a required orientation for teachers new to the program that would at least include a navigation overview of Google Classroom, specific direction on how to set up breakout rooms, an explanation on the expectation of teacher availability to students, and overall online classroom etiquette. Next, school districts should consider setting and enforcing specific guidelines regarding admission dates, attendance, and teacher, parent, and student responsibilities. Heather shared, “We still have people coming in that are not committed to the program.” She explained that the program will not be most beneficial to students who are not committed to the program through regular attendance, attentiveness during lessons, and completing work, or for parents who do not support student learning at home by ensuring attendance and a quiet space for students to work. Off-task behavior of one student often impacts class time and learning for others. Literature supports the notion that online education requires greater learner control and buy-in than what is typically necessary in face-to-face classrooms (Heafner et al., 2019; Kaden, 2020; Middleton, 2020). Though taxes support public schools and it is the right of every child to receive equitable education, online learning is not beneficial for every child (Anderson et al., 2021; Black et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Tawfik et

al., 2021). It is to the best interest of each student that certain perimeters, such as expected attendance, participation in class, completion of work, and parental support be put in place, expected, and enforced to help them be successful and remain in the online program.

Implications for Higher Education. Because of the growing interest in online education at the K–12 level and the increase of enrollment in online educational programs across the country, higher education institutions should consider adding courses specific to online education to their programs. Suggested course topics to consider include current technological trends and applications, establishing classroom community in an online environment, virtual communication skills, and planning for the online classroom. Literature supports findings in this study which suggest that teachers in an online classroom environment face many different challenges than teachers in face-to-face classrooms (An et al., 2021; Tawfik et al., 2021). I believe that these changes would benefit future educators, which may in turn prevent feelings of frustration that were expressed by participants as they described building everything from scratch and learning how to transfer teaching skills from a face-to-face teaching environment to their online classrooms.

Implications for Practice

The participants in this study were practitioners on the front line of the online classroom. Their experiences resulted in findings that should directly impact practice. Specifically, there are practical implications for students, teachers, and parents.

Implications for Students. Students will benefit from a more positive experience in online elementary classrooms if they are present in every possible way than when they are not. While instructor-established presence is critical for effective online classrooms, so is student-established presence. For example, Heather, Julie, and Rebecca lamented over the physically

present but cognitively absent student who watched television or played video games during instructional time, or disregarded course lessons. A student's presence in the classroom, even when virtual, is a crucial part of that student's role as a member of the classroom (Caskurlu et al., 2021; Garrison et al., 2010). Attendance, participation, focused learning, collaboration with peers, and completion of assignments are all examples of ways students may grow in both face-to-face and online environments. In online classrooms, it is necessary for each student to take on a greater amount of personal responsibility to meet those tasks than when in face-to-face classrooms.

Implications for Teachers. In online classrooms, building and managing a CoI is beneficial for student success (Garrison et al., 2010). Students often prefer activities or assignments that are based on real-life situations and skills (Caskurlu et al., 2021) so utilization of examples and assignments that go beyond what can be examined in text is important regardless of the educational platform. Because the physicality of certain activities is removed as an option in an online classroom, it is imperative that teachers provide regular opportunities for students to interact and engage in meaningful ways and to demonstrate application of learning (Avci et al., 2019; Caskurlu et al., 2021; Solone et al., 2020).

This may seem like common sense, but in an online environment, intentionality is key. For example, Christa and Rebecca both mentioned that they are intentional in setting up groups for breakout rooms. They consider student personalities and form groups according to which skills students possess that will likely complement each other and result in strong collaboration. Several other participants noted designating certain slots of time in advance for students to be social. Jodie, Christa, Kelly, Lynn, and Janice all referenced being intentional about getting to know the interests of students in their classrooms. They have used that information to

intentionally build lessons that are relevant to students' lives and interests. All participants in the study were intentional about fostering student-teacher relationships. Some have attended sporting events and others have simply asked questions, given students chances to share about themselves and their experiences, and treated all students fairly and with respect. Julie shared that she has been very intentional at establishing relationships with parents early on through one-on-one parent-teacher conferences, even though that is not a requirement of the online program, because she believes it opened up dialog between them and let parents know she was there to help. She added that, despite the extra time and energy it took to offer the individual conferences, "That was probably the best thing I could have done." All participants have also been intentional with their planning and implementation of lessons.

Another possible implication derived from this study for online elementary teachers is that they may want to consider themselves as trailblazers, navigating a part of the teaching profession that has not been widely developed at this point in time. This may involve more time and patience than some prefer but findings of this study support the idea that offering online education at the K–12 level is an investment to the profession of education as a whole. Education is constantly evolving and the demand for online learning platforms has increased considerably in recent years.

Implications for Parents. Involvement of parents of elementary students enrolled in online classrooms may look somewhat different than those enrolled in face-to-face classrooms (Tawfik et al., 2021). Some basic expectations may cross over, such as making sure students attend school, but parents with students enrolled in an online program need to be prepared for greater responsibility when it comes to monitoring students than when in a traditional school setting for most students to be successful (Solone et al., 2020; Tawfik et al., 2021). According to

participants in this study, some examples, especially for parents of young students, include making sure students have a quiet place to work, ensuring student attendance, checking to see that student work has been completed and submitted, taking advantage of resources offered by the student's teacher, reducing disruptions at home, and communicating effectively with the student's teacher. Online education at the elementary level works best when a partnership exists between the parent, child, and teacher. Julie described it this way:

> I would say that virtual learning works. It CAN work, but virtual learning is a partnership between the teacher and the student and the family. Virtual learning, especially the younger the child is, is truly a partnership on the parents' part with the school. It cannot work if you are just sending a second grader to their bedroom to do his or her work and expect everything's going to be fine.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study was guided by the CoI framework, which describes a learning model to include TP, SP, and CP (Garrison et al., 2010). Each of the presences are interdependent and together create a means by which deep and meaningful learning can occur in online classrooms. The findings of this study confirm the CoI theory as an appropriate framework to consider when facilitating online education in elementary classrooms since data collected reveals evidence of TP, SP, and CP routinely implemented in participants' classrooms and showed social and cognitive benefits to students.

This study also aligns with Moore's ToTD, which recognizes the importance of teachers interacting with students to create knowledge and dialogue through use of communication technologies (Moore & Diehl, 2018). The ToTD states that a certain amount of structure, dialogue, and autonomy results when an instructional designer makes decisions (Moore & Diehl,

2018). The implication here is that an instructor should be intentional in lesson design and implementation in an effort to yield very specific results from students and foster a positive learning environment. If a teacher chooses to do the bare minimum in his or her classroom, the bare minimum from students will likely be the result. However, if that teacher designs instruction that is relevant, applicable to student lives, developmentally appropriate, structured around research-based best practices, promotes student autonomy, and offers opportunity for student collaboration and reflection, the right soil will be in place for students to connect with their learning, construct meaning, and grow academically and socially.

The empirical knowledge gained from this study emphasizes the importance of connection in learning, specifically as it relates to online education. A lack of quality interaction between students and teachers and students and students accounts for many of the problems students encounter in online classroom settings (Blaine, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Klein, 2020). In addition, a lack of connection between students and classroom content or learning opportunities provided as part of an educational program decreases CP and student achievement, according to participants in this study. Judging by the value of student interaction with the teacher, other students, and content according to all participants of this study and the literature surrounding the topic, this study rejects the idea that asynchronous learning is equal to synchronous learning for elementary school children, Students need to develop social and emotional proficiencies as well as cognitive abilities, and 21st century competencies needed for success include the ability to communicate clearly and collaborate (Kriete & Davis, 2014). Based on my findings, there is no question that young students are capable of learning in both synchronous and asynchronous classrooms. However, synchronous classrooms afford students a wider array of opportunities for interaction, including simple recognitions of tone, body

language, and facial expressions that would not be observable through typical asynchronous learning platforms as well as greater opportunity for immediate feedback in relation to practicing skills or asking questions.

Previous research that showed the increasing demand for K–12 online learning options was corroborated through the findings of this study. This study extends previous literature by shedding light on the topic of online education in elementary school settings, which is rarely examined in the literature but growing in popularity among school districts, teachers, students, and families (An et al., 2021; Arnesen et al., 2019; Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Black et al., 2020; Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Davis et al., 2019; Farmer & West, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019). A novel contribution this study adds to the literature is that it took place during a historical event, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations and Delimitations

One limitation of this study is that all participants were female. A male participant was originally selected and agreed to participate, but then dropped out of the study due to health reasons. Another limitation is that there was only one participant to represent first grade. Multiple first grade teachers were invited, but only one accepted the invitation to participate in the study.

Two delimitations of the study are worth mentioning. The first is that this study represents participants who all work in the same online program in the same school district. While this could be viewed as too specific, it is valuable because of the number of teachers, students, and families it represents as it is the largest school district in the state. Another delimitation is that kindergarten was not represented. I chose not to include kindergarten because the experiences of kindergarten teachers would be considerably different than those of first

through fifth grades since kindergarten students in most cases would be non-readers and would be experiencing a regular classroom environment for the first time.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the experiences of teachers who have established presence in their online classrooms. In consideration of the study findings, limitations, and the delimitations placed on the study, future research is recommended. Literature regarding online education at the elementary level is especially sparse but is also lacking in reference to K–12 online education (Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019). The first recommendation is to continue conducting qualitative and quantitative studies that focus on the best practices and effectiveness of K–12 online education, including elementary, middle, and secondary levels.

The second recommendation is an expansion of the first, and that is to research inquiry-based learning methods and activities appropriate for online educational platforms at the elementary level. With the growing popularity of online education for elementary school students, limited amount of research available at this time surrounding the topic (Black et al., 2020; Heafner et al., 2019), and the recognition based on findings in this study that student interactions with each other and content are crucial to learning (Avci et al., 2019; Caskurlu et al., 2021; Solone et al., 2020), future research is needed to determine ways to implement inquiry-based learning in online classrooms.

A third recommendation is to identify appropriate professional development for elementary OT. Teacher needs are often not the same for those who teach in online classrooms compared with those who teach in face-to-face classrooms. Attention needs to be given to what training will best benefit online educators. Studies have been done regarding some higher education institutions that have implemented various practices to enhance asynchronous

instruction to benefit adult learners (Adams & Wilson, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2021). It would be interesting to explore the value of in-person training or synchronous training compared with asynchronous training for teachers.

Another recommendation is to expand the study to comparable populations at multiple sites. This would provide data separate from the boundaries of one program and may shed light on a wider variety of best practices used to establish presence in online classrooms, based on teacher experiences. It would be interesting to see if the same themes emerged when exploring different sites. A collective case study would be appropriate and may lead to deeper understandings of the topic explored.

A final recommendation is to examine online education as it pertains to special education services. Though this study included two participants who currently teach in online gifted classrooms, the experiences examined were unrelated to actual services offered in online special education classrooms. It would be beneficial to examine the effectiveness of online education for students with identified learning challenges.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of teachers who have established presence in their elementary online classrooms. This study revealed some of the beliefs and practices of effective OT who have fostered TP, SP, and CP in their classrooms through the design of lessons and activities, creation of resources, facilitation of learning, utilization of technology, and facilitation of collaborative environments. Online K–12 education is a fast-growing trend in American education today. Technology advancements have allowed for teaching and learning to occur in dramatically different ways than were afforded by traditional education (Huang etal., 2020; Statti & Villegas, 2020; Zhao &

Watterston, 2021). Still, a teacher plays a vital role in the education of students, even if learning is online and the teacher and students are not physically together (Burdina et al., 2019; Saqlain et al., 2020). Experiences shared by the participants in this study as well as literature surrounding the topic of online education indicate that online education can be a viable and effective means of learning (Beck & LaFrance, 2017; Farmer & West, 2019; Gulosino & Moron, 2017; Smith et al., 2016; Ye et al., 2021), even for elementary students. In addition to positive parental involvement and student engagement, when SP, CP, and TP are established in online classrooms, there is great opportunity for student success (Garrison et al., 2010). As Kelly put it:

> We've been able to see the students learning and having skills they are going to be using when they grow up and when they go to college. It's been a completely different way of teaching that I was not able to see when I was in a regular classroom. I have loved seeing what the students have been able to do. I love it. If the program continues, I definitely would like to teach again virtually next year.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 15, 2021

Amy Stevenson
Kristy Motte

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-382 THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TEACHING IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING PROGRAM WHO HAVE ESTABLISHED PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN THE SOUTHEASTERN U.S.

Dear Amy Stevenson, Kristy Motte,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

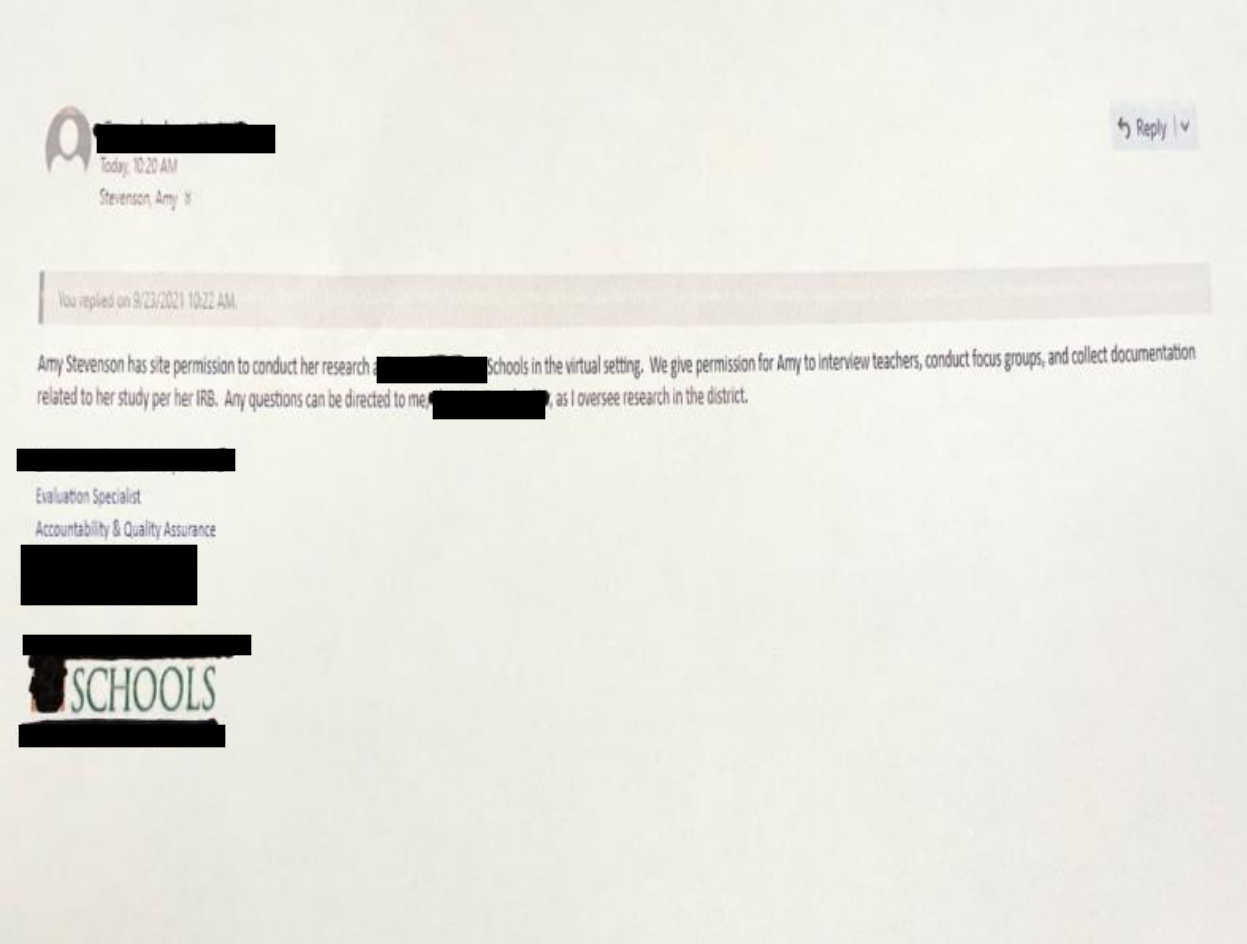
Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [redacted]

Appendix B

Site Permission



[redacted]

Today, 10:20 AM

Stevenson, Amy

Reply

You replied on 9/23/2021 10:22 AM.

Amy Stevenson has site permission to conduct her research at [redacted] Schools in the virtual setting. We give permission for Amy to interview teachers, conduct focus groups, and collect documentation related to her study per her IRB. Any questions can be directed to me, [redacted], as I oversee research in the district.

[redacted]

Evaluation Specialist

Accountability & Quality Assurance

[redacted]

[redacted] SCHOOLS

[redacted]

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate

January 4, 2022

Dear Virtual Teacher,

My name is Amy Stevenson. I am a fellow colleague employed by GCSD, and I am currently conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree (Ph.D.). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of elementary school teachers teaching in a virtual learning program who have an established presence in the classroom. You have been identified as having met the criteria for this study based on your student achievement scores and/or recommendation(s) of colleagues. The research questions for this study will help me to capture the meanings and essences of virtual teacher experiences, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

Participants must be state-certified teachers over 18 years of age who have transitioned from face-to-face instruction to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants must have worked in online elementary classrooms during the 2020–21 school year as well as the current school year. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a personal, recorded interview (45–60 min) and provide examples (e.g., documents) of how your teacher presence, social presence, and cognitive presence were established in your classroom. You may also be asked to participate in a brief focus group discussion (30 min), which will also be recorded. Participants will receive transcripts of video recordings to ensure accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in the study.

To participate, please complete the attached Consent Form, which is to be signed, dated and emailed back to me by Friday, January 7th. Then complete the Participant Demographics Questionnaire by clicking on the link provided at the bottom of this page. After I have received the completed consent form and questionnaire, I will contact you to set up an interview. Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Amy Stevenson
Doctoral Candidate Liberty University

Participant Demographics Questionnaire

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

THE EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TEACHING IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING PROGRAM WHO HAVE ESTABLISHED PRESENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY IN THE SOUTHEASTERN U.S.

Amy Stevenson
Liberty University
School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be in a research study of the experiences of elementary school teachers teaching in a virtual learning program who have established presence in the classroom. You were selected as a possible participant because you teach in an online elementary classroom as part of a virtual program. To participate, you must be state-certified teachers over 18 years of age who have transitioned from face-to-face instruction to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants must have worked in online elementary classrooms during the 2020–21 school year as well as the current school year.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of elementary school teachers teaching in a virtual learning program who have established presence in the classroom. The research questions for this study will help me to capture the meanings and the essences of the participants.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete a brief demographics questionnaire to share background information regarding your experience. It should take approximately 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire.
2. Participate in a single audio- and video-recorded interview that will last approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview will be recorded using two recording devices. The interview will take place using an online conference platform, such as Zoom. The interview will take place at your convenience, either during a teacher workday or before or after school and will not interfere with instruction time. An interview transcript will be provided to you.
3. Review the interview transcript to ensure accuracy.
4. Provide documentation of your choosing to show examples of how you establish teacher presence, social presence, and/or cognitive presence in your classroom. Some examples include lesson plans, photographs of student collaboration or small group instruction, or a written

explanation supported with documentation such as assessments, photographs, or student products.
5. You may be asked to participate in an audio- and video-recorded focus group with 4–6 other participants. The focus group sessions will be held using an online conference platform, such as Zoom and will last approximately 30 minutes to an hour. The focus group sessions will be recorded using two recording devices. If applicable, a focus group transcript will be provided to you.
6. Review the focus group transcript to ensure accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct personal benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing information that may help other online elementary teachers and support future online education.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared. Participants' responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. I will conduct the interviews and focus groups in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. In addition:

- Transcriptions will be provided to each correlating participant to assure accuracy.
- Data and recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer. Any hard copy data will be stored in my safe at home. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your current employer or Liberty University. If you decide

to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

If you have any questions about the study or need to update your contact information, please contact [redacted] You may also contact her faculty supervisor, Dr. [redacted]

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, [redacted]

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

X The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix E

Participant Demographics Questionnaire

1. Please circle your age range: 21 to 30, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, 51 to 60, 61 or older.
2. With what gender do you identify?
3. With what ethnicity/race do you identify?
4. What is the highest level of education you have received?
5. What grade level do you teach?
6. How long have you been teaching this grade level?
7. How long have you been teaching online?
8. Have you taught previously in a face-to-face classroom? ____ If so, for how long?
9. With which brick-and-mortar school are you predominantly affiliated as a virtual teacher?
10. How many colleagues teach your grade level in the virtual program where you teach?

Appendix F

Interview Request

Hello, [Recipient],

Thank you for completing the demographics questionnaire and for your willingness to participate in this study. I am contacting you to set up the personal interview. Please send me some possible dates/times of your availability during the next 7–10 days so we can narrow down a time to meet virtually.

The interview will take about 45 minutes to complete and will be recorded and transcribed. You will receive a copy of the transcription.

Thank you again for your time and assistance with my dissertation research!

Amy Stevenson
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University IRB Study:

Appendix G

Bracketed Experience of Researcher

I have been an educator for over 20 years, working in private and public schools. I have worked in the BCSD for nearly 15 years as an elementary school teacher in a face-to-face classroom and as a teacher trainer and evaluator at the central office. Over the years, I have attended a variety of professional development, state-sponsored, and graduate courses which have extended my training in instructional practices and pedagogy. As a result, I have developed ideas about how an elementary classroom functions best, a teacher's role in facilitating a collaborative learning environment, how to help students take ownership of their learning, and ways to develop rapport with students and families. I also have become very familiar with the expectations of BCSD. I care about the online program that has been established and want to see it and the teachers and students that are part of it be successful.

In addition to working as an educator in the K–12 school system, I have also served as an adjunct instructor for a local university for three years. All of the courses I facilitated in that role were in online classrooms, which afforded me experience as an online instructor. Though courses and students at the higher education level are different than at the elementary level, I recognized the need for establishing presence in the classroom early in the experience.

Appendix H

Interview Guide

Opening Script:

I would like to begin today by asking for your permission to record and transcribe this interview. (If yes, proceed.)

Opening Questions:

While these first four interview questions do not directly address the research questions being studied, they are important for the interview process. These questions serve as a warm-up for the interview and provide context for the questions that follow.

1. *Please tell me a little about yourself. For example, where did you grow up, how long have you been teaching, what grades have you taught, and where?*
2. *What is one of your favorite aspects of being a teacher?*
3. *What is one of your least favorite aspects of being a teacher?*
4. *How would you summarize your online teaching experience so far?*

Research questions five through nine are designed to solicit overall experiences of the participants related to classroom routines, technology, and the transition from face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms.

5. *Please walk me through your experience transitioning from face-to-face instruction to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.*
6. *What caused you to decide to continue to teach in an online classroom, even after students and teachers were permitted to return to brick-and-mortar classrooms?*
7. *What benefits and challenges have you noticed about online education compared with face-to-face teaching?*

8. *What technology tools have been regularly implemented in your online classroom?*
9. *Please describe the typical daily routine in your online classroom.*

Research questions ten through fifteen relate to developing classroom community in online elementary classrooms. It is crucial to understand how to foster interaction among students since this has been shown to be a key component to the success of online learners (Blaine, 2019; Heafner et al., 2019; Sanders & Lokey-Vega, 2020).

10. *How do you foster student collaboration?*
11. *What methods have you implemented to develop a sense of community in your classroom?*
12. *How do you ensure involvement from students during class activities and discussions?*
13. *What has been your experience regarding familial involvement in your online classroom?*
14. *Please tell me about measures you have taken to develop rapport with your students and their families.*
15. *What advice would you offer to new online classroom teachers related to the importance of social presence in an online classroom, based on your experience?*

Research questions 16 through 19 address TP in the classroom. TP is what brings "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5).

16. *How have you established teacher presence in your online classroom?*
17. *What steps have you taken to make sure students are aware of your willingness to help them?*
18. *Please describe your availability to students.*

19. *What advice would you offer to new online classroom teachers related to the importance of teacher presence in an online classroom?*

Research questions 20 through 22 relate to CP and seek to understand the methods used to help students experience academic success in online elementary classrooms. CP refers to how learners construct meaning, which is essential to critical thinking (Blaine, 2019).

20. *What has your experience been with student achievement since teaching online?*
21. *What methods have you implemented to encourage positive student achievement in your classroom?*
22. *How are students held accountable for their work in your classroom?*

The last research question is asked for the purpose of understanding what supports have been beneficial to online elementary teachers.

23. *What professional development tools have been helpful to you as an online teacher?*

Appendix I

Example of Individual Textual Descriptions

Participant: Bev	
Theme	**Significant Statements/Supporting Ideas**
Theme One: Importance of student-teacher relationships	I use a lot of breakout rooms and I stay in the main room. They can roll back in and ask questions, or I'll hop into breakout rooms. They've (students) each created a handshake that is theirs. In the morning, each student is greeted by name and then I do their handshake. It's like a two or three step like just clapping and then a heart or a hammer and a double peace sign. I'll say their name and do their motion and everybody else tries to do those motions as I'm doing them because it's their way of saying good morning to that person too. It's just trying to positively pull them in. If I can tell that they are dragging one day, then I raise my energy. It's amazing how just me raising my energy raises their energy. Just staying positive and using a positive tone…most of the time, I get everybody on and they're working and showing their knowledge. I really feel like that has a lot to do with tone and positivity. I'm a little bit of a jokester…a little bit of a prankster, and they don't get to see that side of me in the virtual setting a lot. Just keep trying to find those connections. Keep trying to connect with kids. I'll do lunches with my kids where, you know, I might have just a few in the group so that I can get to know them better. When I log on at 7:45, I log off at 2:15. They're able to communicate with me all throughout the day.
Theme Two: Value of student-to-student interactions	Every morning we have a family meeting and it typically is at the very beginning. I'll have a question and they can be in the chat box, just kind of answering and sharing. Questions range from what is your favorite winter activity to when you are upset, what is something that helps you regulate. I teach zones of regulation, so we'll share our zone in the morning. I have this phrase – Once a (teacher name), always a (teacher name). They (students) share their feelings. They like to get the emojis and choose the color, so they'll put their color in an emoji for their zone.

	I feel like our family meeting has a variety of being able to share what's going on in our life…just trying to give those moments where they can pull themselves in as a person of, you know, I'm not just a square on everybody's screen. This is who I am. We do a lot of breakout rooms. Most of our day, right after a live lesson, it's go into breakout rooms. I feel like this is where, you know, it's that table talk. It's where you give the lesson and you send the students – Hey, go talk with your group. Students get so much from each other. I tell the students all the time – You guys are way smarter than me and together, you definitely are smarter than me. I want them to be able to talk with each other because, I'm speaking as an adult, and I'm teaching it. Maybe I use teacher lingo that I'm not catching I'm using, but when a student talks with another student, it's that peer-to-peer, child-to-child…they're going to use child lingo. A lot of times, lightbulbs happen because students are talking. Another way that's really, really great to collaborate is to use a Google Slide, but to make it to where it's all everybody in the same one. Now, you have to set a lot of expectations for that at the first. Five times, it may go really, really badly, but you just have to keep doing it and keep setting those expectations because it's a really fun way for them to do a project together and they have a final outcome at the end. I'll do shout outs if I see that they've done something really awesome or if something really impressed me or they went above and beyond. I'll create a slide with their name and then that's presented and we have a confetti cannon that I blast off on the screen so we're able to all celebrate. I have a student of the month, so I choose a student of the month and we celebrate that person and typically choose a few students. So one month might have been helpfulness and so I chose a fe people that either helped me or helped other students. I feel like Pear Deck mirrors the best of me being able to walk around the classroom and see who's doing what. I can also then check their thinking. So my workshops are directly correlated to who did not get it on that Pear Deck, and I can then pull them and say, Hey, you, you, and you…you've been invited to stay with me for math workshop today. I'm doing book clubs. Students are grouped by where their at in their reading journeys.
Theme Three: Parental support	As far as building rapport with parents, weekly emails are sent with newsletters. On top of the newsletters, an email just kind of sharing what we learned this week, what they can expect coming up, and then any important information.

	I have found that the students who are motivated and have parental support do very well. Working with parents, just making sure that when they email I email promptly back, making sure they're getting a quick, fast response. You know, as a parent, I can imagine…they can't come and just walk in and see us in the cafeteria. They can't pop into the classroom, and so they need to know that that communication is going to be quick. They need to know that when I email, I'm going to give a good answer. You kind of learn the students who you just need to talk to the parents.
Theme Four: Learning virtually	Technology integration – Our main platform is Google Classroom and so all things Google Slides and Google Docs. For math, we use Reflex and Dreambox. For reading, I use Epic. There are a lot of other resources that have been provided to us, but I choose the one to two, maybe three that really fit for me and try to become, I don't want to say a master but…if you throw so many things at students, then they just feel like they're dabbling in each and not really getting to know them as a whole or getting anywhere. Participation is a huge part. I'm doing my book clubs. The students are grouped by where they're at in their reading journeys. While the others are not in book club, they are working on what I call an ELA workshop. An ELA workshop has a reading activity, a writing activity, and then, let's say…on A week they might have a spelling and vaocab activity and on B week it would be a grammar activity rather than spelling and vocab. That's alternating and then they would have an independent reading time as well. The reading activity would go right along with what we're learning about in reading for that week, along with the writing activity as well. A lot of times, the writing activities will build upon each other. I have found that the students who are motivated do very well. I have found that the students who are motivated and have parental support do very well. For students who are not intrinsically motivated or are lacking parental support, the virtual program is not for them. Their grades are what holds them accountable.
Theme Five: Challenges of teaching virtually.	Sometimes it's hard to take a break. It's hard to walk away. When you're at school, you have a physical…you've walked away. You've driven away and you're going home. There isn't that breakpoint in the virtual setting and so you have to be motivated to force it. Otherwise it'll encompass your entire day. I find that I either have really supportive parents or I have keyboard warriors. I'm going to be real with you. I have emails that people would never say…people would never say some of the things that they're

	sending. So that can be a very challenging task…just dealing and making sure that communication stays positive and productive with parents. I'm a little bit of a jokester…a little bit of a prankster, and they don't get to see that side of me in the virtual setting a lot. I also like to give a lot to them. I would (brick and mortar) bring cookies and muffins and oranges and bananas that that's missing from the virtual setting. Those tangible things are missing. (references needing to find new ways in virtual)
Theme Six: Benefits of teaching virtually	It did allow me extra time in the mornings so that was really helpful. I feel like there's a lot of stressors that I left behind in brick and mortar. For example, classroom management would probably be a big one that I feel like I've left behind. Yes, we have to set expectations in the virtual setting as well, but you don't have a lot of the interruptions like I used to have in brick and mortar. There is a lot of flexibility. I have a lot more time added back to my day. I'm not commuting to work. I'm not getting ready to go somewhere where I'm having to pack a lunch or having to pack everything I'm going to need for eight hours because I am here at home. I can hop up on a five-minute break, go get fresh water, a fresh cup of coffee…and there's something about that mentally…that's very nice. I don't feel rushed. I feel like I have more time with my kids and that's invaluable to me.
Theme Seven: PD	I feel like a lot of the PD that I've been offered has not been helpful. A lot of times, I will go to a PD and we'll be told that the resources are coming and we don't get them (like SS Weekly). Other times, everything was geared towards brick and mortar and it…it gets frustrating because our time is very valuable. Our time, as with any teacher time, is valuable. To walk into a meeting and hear this isn't really for you but you still have to stay is frustrating and it makes me zone out and not want to be a part of it.

Appendix J

Documentation Provided by Participants

Participant	Artifact
Christa	• Daily Schedule • Breakout Rooms Screenshot – Students were coming up with ways to make music and then shared performances with the class when back together. • Pear Deck activity for math
Jodie	• Example of teacher feedback with an explanation that the teacher interacts with students on their assignments by providing feedback and students can reply to comments. The teacher and student can then work together to complete a task. • Peardeck session screenshot with the explanation that students were interacting on their own screens during a live lesson. The teacher showed vocabulary and modeled solving problems. Students would then try on their own. The teacher could see if students were grasping concepts, participating in the lesson, and she was able to adjust the lesson pace based on student responses. Students then had the same Peardeck for their independent task with different problems. • Student of the month explanation with photos. The teacher shared that students get to create a slide sharing information about themselves. The other students get to learn more about their peers, find out commonalities and differences, and practice complimenting/questioning each other about their interests. • Schedule for afternoon wrap-up session, which is used to promote communication with peers. Monday – tell jokes to each other, Tuesday – Dance together to GoNoodle, Wednesday – Two students can volunteer to read a book to the class, Thursday – Play games, and Friday – Two students can volunteer to read a book to the class.
Karrie	• Photo/Reading Group Schedule with explanation • Google Slides Assignment & Photo– Students learned about the different properties of matter in a Matter Unit. In an inquiry assignment, students were asked to put on an engineer hat to design a boat that could float. They were asked to think about what materials would be needed for the boat and plan out the materials and how they would build it. Students were asked to gather materials and build the boat. Each student was asked to test it out in his/her sink to see if it would float or sink. • Evidence of Class Dojo – Explanation • Screenshot of Pet Show Event
Heather	• Daily schedule to show small groups and after school times when extra help/tutoring is offered. • Link to a lesson

	• Example of a breakout room slide. Students were placed into groups to problem-solve together.
Julie	• Explanation about work with team members regarding lesson plan collaboration and methods students use to get help from the teacher • Morning Announcements Link • Weekly Virtual Awards Link and explanation about regular student collaboration through small groups, lessons/activities in breakout rooms, weekly virtual awards, and fun/social breakout rooms.
Bev	• Daily Schedule • Book Club Document – Spreadsheet used to help in planning and noting quick observations. All students are in a Book Club. The teacher meets with three Book Clubs daily. • Enrichment and Remediation link, including plans. • Book Summaries and Peer Reviews • Student Shout Outs – blank templates for quick creating. • Family Meeting (Morning Meeting) Slides – PDF attached. Slides are used each morning. A new question is posed at the beginning of class. The Mindful Moment changes weekly and sometimes daily. • Google Form Check-In – Students provided with form from the teacher as a check in for feedback, suggestions, and to get an overall pulse on how students are doing. • List of technology utilized in classroom
Vickie	• Daily Schedule – Times hyperlinked to alarms so students can set an alarm if needed. • FlipGrid – Teacher guided students through a unit on inventing. The students were asked to create a back scratcher and then share with the class. • Photo of student mailings. The teacher wrote an explanation saying that when a student is caught doing something well, the teacher gives him/her a shout out during Morning Meeting time. Shout out names are entered into a drawing and at the end of the week, the teacher draws names and mails those students stickers with a shout out card.
Rebecca	• Daily Slide Example w/ Feedback Link • Lesson on inquiry that the teacher developed and taught about the Boston Massacre. Students read different sources and determined the quality of the source and whether or not it would help to answer the big question: Were the British soldiers guilty of murder? • Schedule to reflect small group meetings and math remediation.
Janice	• Daily Schedule – very detailed. Shows Morning Meeting, share time, guided math practice, breakout room problem-solving activities, skill/concept introduction, guided discussion and modeling, student-led discussions, skill based enrichment and remediation, help sessions, lunch and recess (including Friday Lunch Socials), inquiry based learning activities in science and social studies, social time, clubs, and SEL lessons

	• Entomophagy Opinion Writing Project. Student were introduced to the topic of Entomophagy and given a variety of articles and videos to analyze. Each student constructed his/her own opinion of entomophagy based on analysis of the sources. Opinion essays were then written with evidence from the sources as support. Throughout the project, students met in groups to discuss ideas and opinions. • Student Work Product/Sample (Writing entitled Eating Bugs!?) • Social Presence Chart with explanations (Morning Meetings, Friday Lunch Socials, Student Council, Clubs, and Breakout Room Recess)
Lynn	• Daily Schedule – including Morning Meeting, small group workshops, and core subjects. • Feedback Link • Lesson Slides to demonstrate cognitive presence • Rubric • Extension slides for early finishers – 2 choices (Read more about the experience of a Holocaust survivor with a link to an article OR read about life during WWII on Epic.)
Kelly	• Daily Schedule • Social Studies Project Link • Student Template Link • Form for Escape Room Answers

Appendix K

Focus Group Guide

1. Please introduce yourselves.
2. What are some noticeable outcomes or behaviors of a cohesive classroom environment in online education?
3. How does the role of a teacher impact student success in an online classroom as opposed to just posting videos or assignments for students to complete online?
4. Let's talk further about some ways students are able to demonstrate critical thinking in a online setting.
5. Several have expressed the importance of parental involvement in general, but especially when his/her child is in a online classroom. What does that look like?
6. Professional development was a hot topic in this study. Will you clarify what is and is not important to you related to supports you believe to be needed as an online teacher?

Appendix L

Inquiry Audit

Date	Action Taken	Notes
9/23/21	Site Approval	Received in an email
12/15/21	Liberty University IRB Approval Received	
1/6/22	Sent invitations, questionnaires, and consent forms to candidates	Candidates were invited. If they chose to participate, they were asked to complete a questionnaire supplied as a Google Link at the bottom of their invitation letter and a consent form attached in the invite email.
1/14/22	All questionnaires and consent forms were received by this date from candidates who accepted the invitation to participate.	
1/17/22	Pilot interview with Christa	Consider removing question #9. Remove question #19 (it's redundant) Stressed importance of building relationships with students. Gave examples. Loves being challenged as a teacher and online classroom provides that. Remove question #9. It has potential to take away from details offered in other questions.
	Interview with Lynn	Reported having a very low group this year. Very little parent involvement as well. Emphasized importance of getting to know students and stressed that classroom management is much easier than in face-to-face classroom.
1/18/22	Interview with Janice	Stressed importance of putting procedures in place early and being consistent. Shared multiple opportunities for student socialization and collaboration.

		Also shared multiple opportunities for student socialization and collaboration.
	Interview with Rebecca	Parents have been supportive. Stated discipline issues are considerably better in online classroom than face-to-face.
1/19/22	Interview with Vickie	Loves interacting with students. Stated that relationships with students are what keeps her going. Stated that building rapport with kids virtually is not that different than in person.
1/20/22	Interview with Heather	Appreciated independent work time that was built into schedule the previous year. Very tech savvy. Saw such gains…was amazed. Attributed some of that to having a set schedule and little to no interruptions.
	Interview with Karrie	Emphasized importance of connecting with students. Likes to incorporate fun through music and movement.
	Male participant canceled the interview and dropped out of the study	
1/21/22	Interview with Bev	Mentioned regular use of breakout rooms. Student handshake Several examples for student collaboration and socialization as well as rapport-building activities
1/24/22	Interview with Jodie	Stated feeling very connected to online students. Regular use of breakout rooms. Handful of students distracted in their learning environments at home.

	Interview with Julie	A favorite aspect of teaching is building relationships with students. Regular use of breakout rooms. Communication is key. Virtual learning is a partnership between the teacher, student, and family.
1/25/22	Interview with Kelly	Regular use of breakout rooms. Students sharing documents with each other and using the highlighting tools to help edit. Fun Fridays Stressed that students who need constant supervision are less successful and that online learning is not for everyone.
1/28/22	All artifacts/documentation received by this day with exception to documentation from 1 participant.	Documentation was received from 1/21–1/28.
2/1/22	Focus Group conducted with 4 participants (Christa, Heather, Julie, and Rebecca)	6 participants were invited, but 2 were unable to make it at the last minute. 1st, 2nd , and 4th grades were represented.
2/23/22	Final documentation submitted from last participant.	Delay was due to health issues at home.

Appendix M

Fundamental Textural-Structural Synthesis Sample

The textural-structural synthesis combines participant data to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience. In this research study, the fundamental textural-structural synthesis captured the essence of elementary teachers who established presence in their online classrooms. The themes that emerged in this study included importance of student-to-teacher relationships, interactive learning, teaching virtually, and professional development.

Importance of Student-to-Teacher Relationships

The first theme that emerged was importance of student-to-teacher relationships. Each of the research participants stressed the importance of building relationships with students to facilitate learning. Two subthemes of importance of student-to-teacher relationships included teacher passion for helping students and teacher availability to students. While all participants viewed relationship-building as important, some shared that they were surprised by how much easier it was to do in online classrooms than what they initially expected. Though they may need to be more intentional about establishing relationships and creating opportunities for interaction in their online classrooms than what was required to build relationships in face-to-face classrooms, all participants expressed the belief that they have been able to get to know their online students well and have formed positive relationships with them. Some participants felt like they have known their students better through an online platform than when they taught in face-to-face classrooms because they have been able to see the home environments of students and have witnessed many of the nuances of that such as student interests, family members, and pets.