

Morale of Educators Amidst a Pandemic: A Heuristic Phenomenological Inquiry

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

This heuristic phenomenological qualitative research study aimed to understand the educators' perceptions of their lived experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on teacher morale in the U.S. The theory guiding this study is Narrative Identity Theory, in which Dan McAdams proposed the first full theoretical model. This theory contributed significant awareness to the phenomenon studied when trying to understand the evaluative and emotional meaning expressed through the stories of the teachers. The essence of morale is understood more holistically considering the contribution of Narrative Identity Theory. Data was collected through online interviews on Microsoft Teams and analyzed using NVIVO to create codes and themes.

Keywords: morale, teacher morale, trauma, asynchronous, synchronous, technostress

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to God, my family, and my friends. The endless hours I spent devoted to research and the outpouring of support I received from everyone will not be forgotten. My heavenly father provided me the strength and endurance to complete this journey when I sometimes wanted to quit. A feeling of gratitude to my loving mother, Gayla, who has always been one of my best cheerleaders. A special thanks to my loving husband and daughter, Larry, and Ciara, for taking on the extra chores so I could focus on my writing and who spent many hours listening to and encouraging me. I also dedicate this dissertation to my loving daughter Cecilie, father Jim, sister Trudy, and nephew Jeremiah, who have always supported me throughout the process. In addition, a special thanks go to my best friend Veronika, another cheerleader who always encouraged me throughout the process. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my coworkers, administrators, and students. I appreciate all they have done with support throughout the entire doctorate program.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The conceptual analysis of teacher morale has been researched for many years. Still, it is one of the least studied (Converso et al., 2019), and defining morale has been difficult because of the elusiveness of the concept. "Teacher morale influences all aspects of the teaching and learning environment within the school setting" (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002, p. 16). Therefore, having that much importance on the educational system's success, it is a concept worth researching.

Teaching during COVID-19 has introduced challenges beyond those typically encountered by teachers. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, everyday stressors for teachers impacting their morale were workload, behavior management, and the fear of teaching during a crisis (Frenzel et al., 2016; Kim & Asbury, 2020). The pandemic caused an unprecedented challenge to education and the delivery of learning. New expectations were placed on teachers, influencing their morale and cognitive and emotional wellness (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Youmans, 2020). Even as the schools return to traditional learning environments, there is lasting evidence of the pandemics' influence on teacher morale.

Situation to Self

As a secondary teacher, on March 11, 2020, I said a quick goodbye to my students as I had a sick daughter at home, and we were all preparing for our week-long spring break. When leaving my classroom that day, my daughter was home sick, so I just picked up my things like I would on any ordinary day and went, not thinking it was the last day I would ever see my students in my class again for a long time. A few days into spring break, teachers received district information that with the ever-changing situation related to COVID-19, the

Commissioner of the Florida Department of Education had directed all schools in Florida to be closed for two weeks. Other teachers and I were required to report to our schools on the first Monday, which would have been the return after spring break for a staff meeting. Living in Florida, educators are used to doing emergency shutdowns, having just dealt the previous year with Hurricane Irma, but this was different because none of us had dealt with a worldwide pandemic. My school district and administrators were professional and on top of the circumstances. Yet, when returning to the school for the first time for the staff meeting, everyone responded differently. My morale and my perception of my coworkers' morale were affected by fear and the unknown.

The last almost two years since this has begun have been a different experience for each teacher locally and globally. Locally, teachers in my school district had to immediately learn how to transition to an online teaching format with teachers at every learning curve stage. Then, return the following year to teach in person with masks, asynchronous and synchronous, all simultaneously. When students initially returned last year, even wearing masks, they were constantly getting COVID and having to miss school for at least two weeks. Then, students sitting in the proximity of those students in the classroom had to quarantine for two weeks; those affected were going back and forth between in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous learning while teachers continually had to adjust their curriculum as well as their grading. This current school year, locally, in my school district brought students back with mask-wearing optional for teachers and students. Unfortunately, this was not the case for every school that implemented different mandates for teachers and students, even in my or other states.

This experience of teaching during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the phenomenon of how this has affected teachers' morale is natural and concerning and will guide the research I will be conducting; researching this ontological issue through a qualitative phenomenological lens, reporting how co-researchers interviewed have viewed this experience differently (Moustakas, 1994). In this phenomenological study, this researcher will use a constructivist view, using my background to shape my interpretation of my own and other teachers' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Problem Statement

The problem is the topic of teacher morale has not extensively been researched (Frenzel et al., 2016), and research is minimal on how a pandemic of this nature impacts teachers' morale. Historically, no specific data points to any phenomenon that completely transformed the teaching experience as COVID-19 has. Part of the limitations of the current research is that a cross-sectional or autoethnographic study only provides a snapshot of the teachers involved (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Rap et al., 2020). Other research done on education during COVID-19 is more focused on educators and adapting to technology and curriculum than it is on the impact this transition in education has had on their morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Mohapatra, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020; Rodriguez-Muniz, Buron, Aguilar-Gonzalez, & Muniz-Rodriguez, 2021; Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Truzoli, Pirola, & Conte, 2021; Obrad, 2020; Pozo-Rico, Gilar-Corbi, Izquierdo, & Castejon, 2020; Fernandez-Batanero, Roman-Gravan, Reyes-Rebello, & Montenegro-Rueda, 2021; Dulohery, Scully, Longhurst, Stone, & Campbell, 2021; Moss, 2021). This study is

grounded in theoretical perspectives that inform our understanding of morale related to identity and physiological needs. The anecdotes of the teachers' experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic can create more profound insight into the impact on morale.

Purpose Statement

This study aims to understand the experiences of secondary education teachers related to the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on morale. Because this phenomenon is new and still influences many educational systems, empirical insight into teacher morale is limited. However, identifying these contextual variables will illuminate teachers' experiences as they transition and redefine their roles. While research shows that educators consistently deal with challenging work environments, children who struggle from trauma and crisis, student learning outcomes, instructional preparation, and the daily balance of administrative expectations, the pandemic has cast unprecedented stress on educators.

Significance of the Study

Individuals worldwide were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic that the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Helene, Hill, Rosehart, & Sadhra, 2020). The loss of jobs, deaths, and typical daily life routines redefined based on location, and the priorities of the local government put life on hold. The education system, from kindergarten through college, had to be restructured immediately to meet the needs of this new way of life. After the March 2020 spring break, the entire educational experience moved online, causing educators to attend to student morale with new effort and urgency. Some creative attempts included holding parades, visiting students in person but from a distance, to hosting high school graduations through a drive-thru. Although most educators stepped up to the task and continue to

serve well, there is critical to understand how this phenomenon impacted teachers' morale to address lingering issues and develop preventive measures anticipating future crises.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do teachers perceive the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale?

RQ2: What lingering consequences of COVID-19 continue to impact morale?

Definitions

In this section, the concepts defined are core to the framework of this study. The following definitions found in scholarly journal articles reference earlier articles in the last ten years. This researcher has reviewed the illustrations as the definitions used in this paper.

Morale. Morale is a state of mind determined by the individual's anticipation of the extent of satisfaction of those needs, which s/he perceives as significantly affecting their whole work situation (Converso et al., 2019; Evans L., 1997; Willis & Varner, 2010). The individuality of human behavior arising from the difference in life experiences and biographical factors is why morale differs for one teacher who may accept a specific situation. In contrast, another might complain (Evans L., 1997).

Teacher morale. Researchers have defined teacher morale as a positive attitude and enthusiasm toward one's job (Lambersky, 2016).

Trauma. Trauma is the result of an event, series of events, or a set of circumstances experienced by an individual that is emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting

adverse effects on the individual's function and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA's, 2014).

Synchronous Learning. Synchronous learning is a form of learning. There is a direct interaction between students and teachers while simultaneously using online forms such as conferences and online chats (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020).

Asynchronous. Asynchronous learning indirectly uses an independent learning approach (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020).

Technostress. A person's inability to healthily adapt to new technology can affect their performance and limit their use (Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020).

Summary

The pandemic's short- and long-term effects on teacher morale are still somewhat of a mystery. Although this generation of teachers has no experience with a global crisis that transformed the educational structure like COVID-19., the impact on teacher morale shall be dissected and understood through more research. Research has been done worldwide on this phenomenon, primarily on the impact COVID-19 has had on pedagogy and technology. Through a heuristic phenomenological study, this researcher hopes to be an instrument of self-discovery in hearing and reflecting on the experiences of myself and fellow educators and how this global crisis has affected us.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two includes the theoretical relevance and literature review related to teacher morale before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theories presented in this chapter are The Narrative Identity Theory, Appraisal Theory, Maslow's Needs Theory, and Relational-Cultural Theory. In addition, this study will seek to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the level of morale of teachers.

Theoretical Relevance to Teacher Morale

Four theories contributing to a deeper understanding of teacher morale are detailed in creating a theoretical framework supporting the concept. The section poses Narrative Identity Theory, Appraisal Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Relational Cultural Theory as meaningful contributors to the notion of morale. Each offers insight that illuminates the existence of morale and is generalized to teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative Identity Theory argues that individuals or narrators develop and internalize an evolving life story rooted in episodic autobiographical memory, providing life with unity and a sense of purpose (McAdams, 2001). From an external perspective, the narrator captures meaning in one's thoughts and can evaluate and emotionally respond to the event in the narrative (Rivera-Obra, 2021). The narrator finds meaning through perceived existence of an alternative, and through performing this selection, the fact that they are selecting becomes a factor in the choice itself (Holler & Klepper, 2013). Narrators may find restrictions from reality, but their meaning can be constantly recreated or replaced (Holler & Klepper, 2013). The narrator makes sense of

their lives and the context of their lives with others, allowing them to see the world differently (Rivera-Obra, 2021; Holler & Klepper, 2013).

This theory contributes significant awareness to the phenomenon studied. There is no doubt that COVID-19 is a historical event that creates a life-changing impact on all that experienced it; therefore, it is essential to appreciate the perspective of the theory when trying to understand the evaluative and emotional meaning expressed through the stories of teachers navigating through the pandemic. The essence of morale is understood more holistically considering the contribution of Narrative Identity Theory.

Appraisal Theory

An early definition of the theory is through an individual's subjective evaluation of the event, and that emotion can be induced and evolve based on their evaluation (Scherer, 1999). An influential pioneer of this theory, Richard Lazarus (1966), asserts that stress and emotion are cultivated in a person's ability to cope with the consequences of the event's positive or negative significance to their well-being (Scherer, 1999). The importance of Lazarus' perspective on this theory is that it allows for a reappraisal of an event based on new information (Scherer, 1999).

Appraisal Theory posits that it's not an event that influences a teacher's morale but their appraisal of the event (Frenzel et al., 2016; Evans L., 1997; Roseman & Smith, 2001; Harding et al., 2019). This theory points to the subjective nature of teachers' experiences during the pandemic and how appraisal plays a role in realizing morale through this crisis.

As teachers are still navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic, evaluating how individuals experience an event differently based on their happiness levels and life experiences can cause different emotions for different people. Appraisal Theory will provide a way to

interpret the co-researchers' perception of how the COVID-19 pandemic has and is continuing to affect their morale as they appraise and reevaluate this event. A teacher's initial response to the pandemic and their evaluation or reappraisal will be significant to this research.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs values the person and their need for self-actualization. Maslow created a hierarchy of five different levels or stages that need to be met before a person can reach the fifth level of self-actualization: physiological needs, safety needs; social needs; esteem needs, and then self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Maslow posits that each person's nature is unique and universal to the individual, and the individual's will toward actualization is both an innate and natural process (Maslow, 1970). If any basic needs are affected due to the current pandemic, actualization may be blocked, affecting a teacher's perception and morale (Seligman & Reichenberg, 2014).

Evaluating a teacher's needs pre-and-post-COVID through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy helps determine how a teacher's morale is affected by their ability to move towards actualization. Maslow's basic premise is that humans must meet physiological needs before their safety needs. When completed, they intrinsically move towards social and esteem conditions, eventually leading to actualization (Maslow, 1970). The philosophical underpinnings of Maslow's hierarchy will help bring meaning to understanding teachers' growth through the different stages during this time.

Relational-Cultural Theory

Relational-Cultural Theory, RCT, is a shift from some of the previous theories. It focuses on self-sufficiency and independence: RCT suggests connections and relationships as the basis of

development (Guy & Arthur, 2020). The theory posits that humans grow through and towards links (Jordan, 2018). RCT is usually viewed through the feminist lens, though men's psychological experience and need for connections are also considered equally important (Jordan, 2018).

At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers were isolated, and even though most school districts have returned to the classroom, some districts have continued to isolate using technology. They are looking at Relational-Cultural Theory as the theoretical assumption to help understand the isolation's impact on teachers. Teachers' sense of isolation pre-pandemic and even back in the classroom has psychologically affected teachers experiencing disconnection (Guy & Arthur, 2020). Researchers can explore the impact of this disconnection on teacher morale through the theoretical underpinnings of RCT. As teachers share their experiences, the importance of this disconnection on their morale will be valuable to understanding them as holistic social beings.

Pedagogical practices will likely not return to the pre-pandemic mode of delivery. The traditional fundamentals of teaching are forever changed. Teachers are victims of the unpredictability, abruptness, and volatility of COVID-19. These theories contribute to a greater understanding of morale through internalized experiences, subjective evaluation of events, adjustment of need and loss of status, and the importance of human connection. Collectively these values define and illuminate the essence of teacher morale.

Teacher Morale Pre-COVID-19

Teacher morale and their experience with job-related satisfaction have been discussed among educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers linked to various intrinsic and

extrinsic factors. For example, a teacher's job satisfaction is interrelated with their relative perspective and realistic expectations. Reports show that teachers are at an increased risk of suffering from lower morale, and this can be problematic for not just the teachers but their students as well have an impact on student learning (Converso et al., 2019; Willis & Varner, 2010; Sherman, 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Frenzel et al., 2016; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the factors that affect a teacher's job satisfaction is essential to understanding how it affects their morale.

A teacher's job satisfaction concerns how they view their job pertaining to intrinsic and extrinsic factors associated with their job (Johnson et al., 2005; Evans L., 1997; Converso et al., 2019). A teacher's expectations and attitude, both inside and outside the classroom, can affect morale and are interrelated with professionalism and a teacher's perspective (Johnson et al., 2005; Evans L., 1997; Tate, 2020; Converso et al., 2019; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020). An intrinsic factor is a teacher's need to feel respected and that their talent is being utilized and developed. Extrinsic factors such as their expectations of recognition, relationships with their students, collegiality, compensation, and the physical work conditions of the school all can affect a teacher's perspective and if they feel satisfied in their job (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Harding et al., 2019; Frenzel et al., 2016; Willis & Varner, 2010; Sherman, 2021; Converso et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012; Kidger et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2005; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011; Hos & Cinarbas, 2018; Interlandi, 2018; Wender & DeMille, 2019). Teachers are managers of their classrooms, but they also build relationships and interact socially with students, parents, and staff (Wender & DeMille, 2019).

Awareness of the mutual causality between these intrinsic and extrinsic job factors and teacher morale is essential for understanding how it is affected (Converso et al., 2019; Willis & Varner, 2010; Sherman, 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Frenzel et al., 2016; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016; Hos & Cinarbas, 2018).

Professionalism

Though contextual, professionalism can range from teachers with a global perspective beyond their classroom, wanting to continually expand their vision and incorporate a broader perspective, to educators who are more classroom-focused and intuitive (Evans L., 1997). A teacher's professional orientation can affect their morale and attitude toward school issues and if they feel satisfied with their conception of what is happening in their school and what they believe should be happening (Evans L., 1997). Professionalism and high teacher morale is achieved when the administration, coworkers, students, and parents respect their expertise and autonomy in the classroom (Govindarajan, 2012; Evans L., 1997; Converso et al., 2019). Although professionalism stems from the teacher providing excellent instruction and keeping a pulse on current trends, empowering teachers through nurture, support, and feeling valued by the administration and the school community will provide higher teacher morale (Govindarajan, 2012; Evans L., 1997; Converso et al., 2019). Teachers who feel supported will have higher morale, and teachers with higher morale contribute to their success in the classroom and their perspective on the position (Govindarajan, 2012; Evans L., 1997; Converso et al., 2019).

Recognition

Most teachers feel unacknowledged and even unknown by their administrators (Converso et al., 2019; Lambersky, 2016; Willis & Varner, 2010; Frenzel et al., 2016; Govindarajan, 2012). Like students, teachers want genuine and personal positive reinforcement (Lambersky, 2016). External validity affects a teacher's morale because of the positive relationship between teacher enjoyment, the desirable teaching behaviors shown in their instruction, and their caring attitude toward the students (Frenzel et al., 2016). There is also a connection between teacher morale and student achievement (Harding et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012). Teachers having low morale may lead to underperforming, affecting a student's well-being and success in the classroom (Harding et al., 2019). Sensitivity to morale can significantly affect the teacher, the students, and the climate and structure of the school (Converso et al., 2019; Frenzel et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2019; Willis & Varner, 2010; Govindarajan, 2012).

Student-Teacher Relationship

Pedagogy is an integral part of teaching, but the relationships teachers build can foster or affect positively or negatively how they learn and their morale (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Harding et al., 2019; Frenzel et al., 2016; Converso et al., 2019; Sherman, 2021; Willis & Varner, 2010). The disconnect teachers and students have in an online environment has shown the importance of the interchange with instant student feedback (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). Honest intentions, patients, and empathy toward students are fulfilling for the teacher and encourage a positive student learning environment leading to success in the classroom (Frenzel et al., 2016; Sherman, 2021). A mutual causality exists between better teacher well-being, lower teacher depressive symptoms, and better student well-being and psychological difficulties

(Harding et al., 2019). The reciprocity of teacher and student well-being adds to a positive school environment that increases students' growth and strengthens educators' morale in the classroom and the school community (*Converso et al., 2019*).

Collegiality

An essential part of the school community is collegiality. Morale can be affected positively and negatively depending on teachers' connection with fellow teachers and interprofessional collaboration (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; *Converso et al., 2019*). Interprofessional collaboration on curriculum is vital for teacher morale and provides a broader emphasis on aspects affecting healthy school organizations (*Converso et al., 2019*). Understanding peer faculty for educators is essential to bounce off ideas; otherwise, they can experience isolation and disconnection from their peers and practices (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). Therefore, it is essential for educators to gather best practices from their peers and to learn from one another (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). Peer relationships can affect teacher morale, school culture, and work conditions.

Poor Physical Work Conditions

High job demands, poorly defined tasks, and poor physical work conditions can affect an educator's mental health and morale (Govindarajan, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011). Teacher morale and professional satisfaction can stem from the teacher's perception of the entire school community (Govindarajan, 2012). There is a higher risk of common mental disorders and lower morale with high job demands, poor job training, and poorly defined job tasks (Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016). These demands can cause teacher stress and

dissatisfaction, leading to poorer well-being and morale (Govindarajan, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016; Stansfeld, Rasul Head, & Singleton, 2011). Teachers dissatisfied with one element of their job may affect their expectations and perception of being fairly compensated.

Compensation

Compensation is another linked factor significantly impacting teacher morale and job satisfaction (Willis & Varner, 2010; Lambersky, 2016; Govindarajan, 2012; Converso et al., 2019). It is public knowledge of a teacher's average salary in every state and county. During salary negotiations, teachers feel undervalued as professionals when they know they are doing the same job that another teacher does in another location or even in the same school for thousands more. A study revealed that 88% of teachers believed they were underpaid, affecting their morale (Willis & Varner, 2010). Conversely, schools with high teacher morale felt compensated with fair wages (Willis & Varner, 2010; Govindarajan, 2012). Therefore, compensation is a critical dimension of the school culture and how it impacts a teacher's morale and job satisfaction (Willis & Varner, 2010; Lambersky, 2016; Converso et al., 2019).

Summation

Extrinsic factors influence a teacher's perspective on the job, such as poor physical working conditions, work overload, time pressure, and compensation to their expectations (Johnson et al., 2005; Evans L., 1997; Tate, 2020; Converso et al., 2019). A teacher's perspective can also stem from outside sources controlled by administrators. Teachers feel affected by decisions or policies based on arbitrary criteria, and it is essential to have a voice in these decisions (Willis & Varner, 2010; Tate, 2020; Converso et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012).

Teachers that have a part in the decision-making and a voice in the school culture will have a positive perception, realistic expectations, higher morale, and be more productive when they feel they have a part in the process (Lambersky, 2016; Johnson et al., 2005; Evans L., 1997; Willis & Varner, 2010; Tate, 2020; Converso et al., 2019; Govindarajan, 2012). Therefore, the attitudinal responses that affect an individual teacher's professionalism, relative perspective, and realistic expectations all come into consideration when defining and discussing teacher morale (Harding et al., 2019; Stansfeld, Rasul, Head, & Singleton, 2011; Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger, 2016).

Teacher Morale During COVID-19

When the pandemic began in March 2020, schools were immediately closed. Eventually, those who could reopen did so virtually for students (Evans et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). Reevaluation of the philosophical underpinnings of education happened to meet the current needs of teachers and students during so many unknowns. Online curriculum existed, but some school districts utilized it more than others (Evans et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). Teachers went from real-time face-to-face to online synchronous and asynchronous learning, which added new challenges for educators that were at various learning curves, with some being more technologically proficient than others (Evans et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). One of the adjustments teachers had to deal with going online was not having the face-face social element of teaching, adding another feature for teachers to try and create relationships without real-time discussions and feedback (Evans et al., 2020). The

pandemic affected students as well as people everywhere in different ways, and for educators, it created new expectations and challenges with curriculum and technology that had an impact on their mental health and morale (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Tempski et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020). Even the most experienced teachers have had to learn to balance their emotional wellness, realize the importance of relationships and acclimate to this new way of teaching during a crisis.

Emotional Wellness

Teachers have always had the everyday stressors of workload and behavior management that affect their morale, leading to burnout, lower confidence, and eventually quitting (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat, December 2020). When the pandemic began, the initial stressor for teachers was the uncertainty due to a sudden shutdown of everything (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat, December 2020). Teachers had to learn to adapt to curriculum and technology demands that led to grief and stress while not knowing if there was an end in sight (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat, December 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boda-Grau, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020; Rap et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020; Truzoli, Pirola, & Conte, 2021; Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Fernandez-Batanero, Roman-Gravan, Reyes-Rebello, & Montenegro-Rueda, 2021; Moss, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021). Even though the pandemic is not over, teachers are finding ways to cope and overcome the grief and uncertainty that has been causing them stress and lowering their morale

(Tempski et al., 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Rai, 2021; Pozo-Rico, Gilar-Corbi, Izquierdo, & Castejon, 2020; Sherman, 2021).

Initial uncertainty. A job is a big part of a person's daily life and can affect their morale when they experience stress and burnout (Kumawat, December 2020). For example, the initial experience of teachers from school closures and lockdowns led to uncertainty and pressure from the suddenness and inability to prepare; students had questions, and teachers didn't know how to answer (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Additionally, not training teachers but expecting them to transition into online teaching and meet their students' curriculum and emotional needs led to grief and uncertainty (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat, December 2020).

Living with grief and uncertainty. The shift to online learning in the Spring of 2020 across the world transitioned out of necessity over the concern of the spread of COVID-19 (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat, December 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Rap et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020; Truzoli, Pirola, & Conte, 2021; Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Fernandez-Batanero, Roman-Gravan, Reyes-Rebello, & Montenegro-Rueda, 2021; Moss, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021; Youmans, 2020). Of course, online learning already existed, but the pandemic circumstances made this transition distinctive for teachers (Youmans, 2020). Teachers had to go to teaching online full-time quickly, and this brought about many concerns: teachers' experience with technology varied, students and teachers missed out on the social element that is very important to learning, the integrity of the assignments and assessments students were turning in, and not knowing if the students were learning the material (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kumawat,

December 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Rap et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020; Truzoli, Pirola, & Conte, 2021; Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Fernandez-Batanero, Roman-Gravan, Reyes-Rebello, & Montenegro-Rueda, 2021; Moss, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021; Youmans, 2020). Therefore, teachers not only had to figure out how to have an effective online teaching program, but they also had other variables, such as creating a community with their students and colleagues and balancing their personal lives. (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020).

Effective online teaching program. Teachers' ability to easily transition to full-time online had much to do with the teachers' experience with technology (Evans et al., 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020). To have an effective online teaching program, one must be well-designed. Depending on what institution an educator is at or what region they are teaching in, some educators had weeks to prepare, and some had days (Youmans, 2020). In addition, teachers were responsible for instructional methods and media used in learning in an online system. Couple this with online learning experiences that may have never been implemented and then be able to overcome all of these obstacles to make sure that learning continues (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

The pressure educators have had to expand on their technological use has added a level of technostress for teachers (Evans et al., 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020). There are many benefits to schools implementing technology, but it can also damage teacher morale due to an increased work overload (Evans et al., 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020). In addition,

during the pandemic, some teachers were thrown into using technology programs they weren't familiar with, and learning to adapt is essential for morale. When teachers receive proper support and instruction on using the technology, this will increase their use and decrease their stress and damaging confidence (Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020). Therefore, it can be inferred that a teacher's morale and mental health can positively and negatively affect teaching and learning. Due to teachers' vital role in a student's education, a teacher's morale and stress level can affect a student and their knowledge (Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020).

Pedagogical decisions. The initial transition to full-time online ERT, emergency remote teaching, led to various pedagogical choices regarding how the curriculum was taught (Youmans, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). There were pedagogical challenges for educators because it required confronting beliefs about effective teaching (Evans et al., 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Educators had to revise syllabi, course expectations, and curriculum and consider changing grading options (Chamberlain et al., 2020).

Teachers now had to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of students in both an asynchronous and synchronous mode of teaching: student communication via email, open forms, chat rooms, discussion boards, audio and video conferencing, collaborative team/group work, simulations, and Q & A questions (Moorhouse, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). Then, a rise in concerns about whether students had enough devices at home and if they even had internet (Moorhouse, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). Motivating students who are less likely to be autonomous provided new challenges because the teacher had to facilitate instruction and provide opportunities for reflection and discourse (Youmans, 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, &

Graham, 2012; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Evans et al., 2020). Another challenge for educators with asynchronous and synchronous learning was not to feel like just graders and evaluators of students' work but to feel like they are teaching them (Youmans, 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Evans et al., 2020). Online teaching, even synchronous, was difficult because of the class sizes, and students might turn off their cameras for privacy issues (Moorhouse, 2020). If students turn off their cameras, a teacher doesn't know who is behind the camera, if the student is listening, or if they are doing something else during the instruction.

The integrity of assessments and assignments changed with asynchronous teaching because the students had all the resources at home to use. Most students don't enjoy reading independently and only want it as a part of a group because of the classroom interaction that would take place, so missing that, they aren't doing it (Evans et al., 2020).

Creating community with their students and colleagues. Educational professionals are most vulnerable to burnout and low morale because of the emotional demands of building community with their students and colleagues (Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Zhao, Li, & Huang, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021). Education is a field that experiences a high percentage of compassion fatigue. The onset of COVID-19 led to work overload and emotional exhaustion as teachers had to deal with curriculum and the awareness of their students, colleagues, and the students' parents (Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021). Since a school is a work team, the importance of educators working together to create community and reconstruction is vital to teacher's morale and the success of

the students (Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Zhao, Li, & Huang, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021). As a result, colleagues struggled with feelings of isolation, disconnect, and sadness. (Guy & Arthur, 2020). The importance of the community within the school helps stabilize a teacher's morale, and when educators feel they have a voice, their morale is high (Fei-Shuang, 2021; Tate, 2020). Conversely, when educators experience a lack of being heard and feel isolated, they must also learn to balance their personal lives (Fei-Shuang, 2021; Tate, 2020).

Balancing their own lives. Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, educators balancing their lives with their work life has been challenging and almost unrealistic (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020). For some, after only a few weeks, anxiety, frustration, and sadness set in because of the logistics; it is mentally and emotionally exhausting (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020). In addition, when the education field is already experiencing a shortage, teachers feel demoralized and burnout and consider a job change (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Tate, 2020; Kurtz, 2020). Another factor leading to this sudden change in job satisfaction and low morale among educators is their health and the health of their family members. Teachers with a health condition that makes them vulnerable or live with someone who does are more likely to leave (Kurtz, 2020). While living with this grief and uncertainty, educators find new ways to overcome and deal with this.

Overcoming grief and uncertainty. Acceptance has become more common as people realize that there are gains and not only losses to the pandemic as they are trying to find ways to find joy and gratitude (Tempski et al., 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Pozo-Rico, Gilar-Corbi, Izquierdo, & Castejon, 2020; Rai, 2021; Sherman, 2021). Therefore, it is a

critical need to learn strategies to cope with the lowering of morale, such as professional development, technology training, appreciating of teachers, and creating better communication that will help to reverse the trend (Tempski et al., 2020; Kominiak 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Pozo-Rico, Gilar-Corbi, Izquierdo, & Castejon, 2020; Rai, 2021; Sherman, 2021).

Finding joy and gratitude. Finding joy and gratitude during a time that has been so difficult for many by taking those times to be thankful gives the educator the motivation and clarity needed (Rai, 2021; Sherman, 2021). In addition, teachers taking a positive outlook during Covid-19 has allowed people more time for volunteering and service to the community, defining what is essential in the objectives and opportunities for more professional development (Tempski et al., 2020).

Professional development and technology training. Educators who provide virtual training and professional development will find the confidence to overcome their grief in this time of uncertainty (Kominiak, 2020). In addition, training provided for teachers to understand technology and pedagogy better and training for helping teachers deal with stress inside and outside the classroom is critical to helping teachers during this time (Kominiak, 2020; Pozo-Rico, Gilar-Corbi, Izquierdo, & Castejon, 2020).

Communication. Good communication is always an essential factor in teacher morale. Specifically, during the pandemic, teachers need to openly share their concerns and anxieties to limit fear and keep focused (Kominiak, 2020).

Teacher Appreciation by Community, Colleagues, and Administration. Without proper support, a teacher might lose confidence and enthusiasm, which is vital for the continued implementation of curriculum material (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). In addition, support from the

community and parents is essential for improving teacher morale because of economic issues; some parents have not supported the move to online education (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Kominiak, 2020). Having teacher support from the parents and community will help change the perception of education (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Kominiak, 2020).

Importance of Relationships

In the words of Brene Brown, "We are hardwired to connect with others; it's what gives us meaning to our lives, and without it, there is suffering" (Guy & Arthur, 2020, p. 896). When a teacher's role is more complex than ever, having relationships with colleagues will help educators feel emotionally and practically supported (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Also, the relationship teachers have with their students in the classroom is so important as well due to the prolonged time they are in the classroom together and how this can influence teacher's mental health (Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020; Evans et al., 2020).

Relationships with colleagues. Encouragement to continue teaching, sharing classroom material, and helping colleagues navigate online programs and applications is the support educators need for instruction to run smoothly (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). In addition, principals demonstrating optimism and encouragement toward their staff help keep their team optimistic and motivated (Thornton, 2021). Teachers expect their schools to work as a team, supporting each other, having professional dialogue, and growing together (Fei-Shuang, 2021). Schools with a good relationship among their educators reflect in the relationship teachers have with students and their success as learners (Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020; Evans et al., 2020).

Teacher-student relationships. Learning best takes place with dialogue and not with decontextualized and monological tasks that students have to complete (Evans, et al., 2020) The students' need for this social interaction leads to a higher level of learning achievement through comfortably discussing topics and constructing course meaning in a safe environment (Youmans, 2020) When students are online full-time in a synchronous classroom, it is so vital the teacher develops an online community by allowing them to discuss off-task topics, so they feel connected when it is time for cognitive aspects of learning (Youmans, 2020) Synchronous teaching takes a different skill set of education and if the teacher doesn't learn to modify their style, it might become teacher-centered (Moorhouse, 2020) In a classroom that is asynchronous, there is only academic interaction which doesn't lead to the same level of learning that can be achieved in a face-to-face classroom or a well-structured synchronous classroom (Youmans, 2020) There is something intrinsically social about language and online learning is a valuable tool, but it can be a detriment and can't replace the face-to-face instruction (Evans, et al., 2020;Chamberlain, et al., 2020).

Educators teach based on the social interaction with their students and their responses, and having students do assignments online; it isn't clear if they find the lesson helpful or if they understand what the teacher wanted them to because of the missing social cues from students (Evans et al., 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). For example, a teacher might walk down a row in a face-to-face classroom or talk to them after class when students struggle. Still, online, the only opportunity for this is through email, phone, or zoom, and if the student doesn't have that relationship with the teacher, they might not share why they are struggling as they would in a traditional classroom (Evans et al., 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). Also,

an interaction that would happen naturally in a school must be premeditated and consciously promoted, making it difficult to establish a real connection with students (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). When there is a mutual disconnect between the teacher and student, it affects the students' commitment as well as the teacher's commitment to them (Youmans, 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Evans et al., 2020). There is something about seeing a student's face and knowing how they are doing. Teachers connect over content but also with their students on outside issues, and that is more difficult in a virtual setting, and bonding is essential for the student's academic success and mental health (Youmans, 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Evans et al., 2020).

During COVID-19, students' mental health and how it affected their learning ability was widely shared due to stress, anxiety, and being unsettled (Youmans, 2020). Students were suddenly displaced from their support system at school due to stay-at-home state orders (Youmans, 2020). Some students could handle this better than others; for some students, this led to stress and trauma that caused teachers to alter their standard teaching practices to help promote resilience (Youmans, 2020). To maintain the student's mental health, teachers had to preserve the importance of the whole child, not just the academic aspects but the social and emotional aspects (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Through teachers' encouragement in the online classroom, teachers and students learn to respond to this new teaching and learning relationship during the pandemic by crafting new hybrid literacy practices and ways to connect (Chamberlain et al., 2020).

Acclimatization

Learning to acclimate during a worldwide pandemic and balancing personal and professional life has its challenges. Teachers deal with their perception of expectations in the new territory by balancing teaching in a digital world with asynchronous, synchronous, and in-person instruction. This unknown has made teachers feel isolated and disconnected from their traditional roles. As teachers learn new strategies to adapt to their unique way of teaching, they are also learning how to navigate the dual roles in their personal life (Guy & Arthur, 2020). Supporting and recognizing teachers will lead to helping teachers to reset their direction and attend to their well-being in this time of crisis (Thornton, 2021).

Challenges. The challenges that teachers faced during the pandemic that has affected their morale have ranged from technical obstacles to student conditioning, the participation of students, and doing this while also having a personal life (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Mohapatra, 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Dolighan & Owen, 2021; Reddy, 2021; Goel, 2021; Duloherly, Scully, Longhurst, Stone, & Campbell, 2021).

Technical obstacles. Some of the technical obstacles that teachers have faced during the pandemic are that all parents and students don't own laptops and cell phones, and if they do, internet signals might be poor (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Moorhouse 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). Some school districts have given students a computer to use at home. Still, communities with a lower budget and students with a lower economic level have found relying on technology an obstacle to their learning (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). Teachers also have been asked to consider extending

the completion time on assignments so that all students have an equal chance at completing their tasks (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020). The focus should be on completing the assignment, which made it challenging to enforce late policies, which has been stressful for teachers to have consistency among students (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Youmans, 2020). Teachers have felt powerless when reaching all their students; these technical obstacles and worry for their vulnerable students have negatively affected their morale (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Student conditioning. It has been stressful for teachers to know how to condition students to participate in online learning due to internal and external factors (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The student's home environment can have a significant effect on a child's learning from interference they might get at home from a sibling or other family member (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). Teachers worry for their most vulnerable students, and not having the students face-face, it is difficult for teachers to know if there are internal factors such as hunger or abuse that interfere with them wanting to learn (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). External factors also affect a student's conditioning to online learning (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2020). For example, students might interfere with other students' learning during a lesson or cheat and look up all the answers. It is difficult for teachers to measure their students' understanding which is stressful for teachers (Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

The participation of students. The participation of students is related to both technical obstacles and student conditioning, but it is also how the teacher keeps the student enthusiastic

about wanting to learn (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). At first, students were excited about online learning, but they began to feel bored and less eager to learn, with students just not doing the work (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The student's commitment to learning is reciprocal to the teacher's commitment to teaching them. When the student isn't enthusiastic, the teacher becomes less active. Then the student will disconnect or give up (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012). Students giving up can affect a teacher's morale because teachers want to see their students succeed, and not having the students participate causes the teacher to worry and stress about the work they are doing (Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020).

Personal life. A highly stressful element for teachers is balancing their personal and job lives (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020). Part of the non-teaching elements of a teacher's life might be caring for vulnerable family members, caring for their children, or managing their mental health while managing all of the other new challenges in teaching (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020). Female teachers may experience higher domestic responsibilities while balancing their jobs and are more stressed than their colleagues (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020). After quarantine, anxiety, sadness, and frustration set in as teachers were overwhelmed with the unknown (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020). Working from home and blending the two identities of personal and professional life is devastating logistically, mentally, and emotionally for educators who have had to learn to adapt (Guy & Arthur, 2020).

Adapting. As teachers learn to adapt, functional and dysfunctional coping strategies have developed (Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil,

Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021). Functional strategies such as educators receiving learning opportunities, seeking support, collaboration time, and techniques to mitigate the issue have helped teachers to adapt to their new roles (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). However, teachers have also used dysfunctional strategies to help them cope, such as drugs, alcohol, giving up on attempting goals, and watching too much t.v. (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020). Therefore, the need for mentally healthy educators to adapt to functional coping strategies is crucial because of their importance in educating the future (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020).

Educator preparation and learning opportunities. Teachers that feel prepared for the new teaching requirements have higher morale (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). Educators expressed a need for professional development in technology training and pedagogy to meet the new requirements and align with state standards (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). Since teachers have experienced a medium to a high level of stress during the pandemic, receiving training from professional trainers will eliminate at least one barrier and help them to cope positively and functionally (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). It is critical that teachers

feel well-trained, and this will lead to them feeling more supported, which is essential to their morale (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020).

Supporting and mentoring the new teacher role. To maintain education through the pandemic, educators need to feel supported by the administration, parents, and community members (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021). In addition, prioritizing a teacher's well-being and creating an environment of empathy creates a level of trust in the educators that helps their stress and morale members (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Morale was boosted when staff connected via social media (Thornton, 2021). This collaboration and communication helped them to not feel as isolated and able to cope (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). Teachers supporting each other during this time can be reciprocal and an asset in coping (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). Veteran teachers can provide mentoring and support for teachers on curriculum. In contrast, new teachers can offer a unique perspective on technology and their awareness of issues raised by the pandemic they experienced as student teachers (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). This support and collaboration are associated with higher job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020).

Collaboration time. During the pandemic, teachers have had much more time to be responsible for students but less time to collaborate with their colleagues, which leaves them feeling isolated and disconnected (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). However, teachers that take the time to connect with their colleagues and learn about their struggles during this time have experienced isolation beginning to fall away, and the collaboration time has allowed them to feel connected again (Guy & Arthur, 2020). In addition, collaborating with colleagues has helped educators to prepare better for lessons, and it has also helped with coping by feeling connected and seen (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020).

Techniques to mitigate the issue. New issues have arisen from teachers working from home and teaching asynchronous and synchronous students. Some functional methods utilized successfully help teachers keep up their morale. Teachers working from home have had to learn to set boundaries so the lines between work and home don't blend (Guy & Arthur, 2020). Even as teachers return to the classroom if they have students who are still online or have moved to a digital curriculum, having boundaries of how late to work or respond to students is essential for their mental health. Teachers need to learn to give themselves grace and flexibility and be optimistic (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020). Everyone is experiencing a collective trauma during the

pandemic. Even though life looks different now, educators need to find joy and optimism to cope functionally, promote self-care, and keep up their morale during the pandemic (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020; Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021; Thornton, 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020).

Support and recognition. Support and recognition of educators during the pandemic by administrators, parents, and community members are essential to support teachers' positive morale. In addition, valuing, respecting, and general appreciation for teachers during this time will help educators to adapt during the pandemic and keep up their morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Suraasa celebrates #TimelessSpiritofTeaching Campaign On Teacher's Day, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Valuing teachers as knowledgeable leaders. During the pandemic, teachers have become accustomed to sharing their knowledge, allowing for more risk-taking and opportunities for practitioner-scholar leadership (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Thornton, 2021). Teachers that have a voice or feel heard improve their commitment and morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Thornton, 2021). Valuing teachers as knowledgeable leaders leads to optimal well-being and high morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Thornton, 2021).

Respecting teachers professionally through leading collaboratively. The administrators' behavior and teacher morale are affected by the frustration of needless meetings covering material already understood (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Thornton, 2021). When principals micromanage their teachers, they feel disrespected as

professionals, which lowers their morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Thornton, 2021). Administrators that have drawn on the strengths and skills of others during the pandemic by distributing leadership made educators feel respected, valued, and trusted as collaborative professionals (Thornton, 2021).

General appreciation for teachers. There is little acknowledgment of teachers, principals, and community members that acknowledge this, encourage commitment, and raise morale (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Suraasa celebrates #TimelessSpiritofTeaching Campaign On Teacher's Day, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Effective administrators adept at acknowledgment have let their teachers know what they appreciate, encouraging educators who feel honored, valued, and emotionally satisfied (Lambersky, 2016). Teachers should receive appreciation from parents, administration, and community members all year (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Suraasa celebrates #TimelessSpiritofTeaching Campaign On Teacher's Day, 2021; Thornton, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers experienced an uphill battle and lower morale than before the pandemic (Kominiak, 2020). Therefore, finding new ways of appreciating teachers during the pandemic will hopefully have a ripple effect: boost teachers' confidence which in turn will hopefully increase their enthusiasm for teaching and will increase students' enthusiasm for learning (Hill, Rosehart, St. Helene, & Sadhra, 2020; Kominiak, 2020; Lambersky, 2016; Suraasa celebrates #TimelessSpiritofTeaching Campaign On Teacher's Day, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Summation

The pandemic negatively affected nearly half of all U.S. adults' mental health, and one-third of Americans showed clinical anxiety (Youmans, 2020). In addition, various identified factors influenced teacher morale: having uncertainty about their students' learning, trying to find a way in this new time, worrying for their students, and finding their own identity (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020). In addition, teachers had to balance teaching during an unknown situation while still balancing their mental health, home life, and maybe caring for children or an elderly parent, which could add a lot of stress and affect their morale (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020). Since teachers are the ones that hold the educational system together, and the pandemic is beyond a teacher's control, how they can balance everything, and the stressors associated is the reason for this study.

Gaps in Research/Gaps in Knowledge

Teacher morale is a topic that has been researched but not extensively. The lack of established scales and quantitative studies to form a baseline means more is to be learned about teachers' overall levels of experienced emotions (Frenzel et al., 2016). In addition, teachers are consistently at increased risk of common mental health disorders (Harding et al., 2019). Research done on teacher morale during the pandemic is touched on by self-reported experiences of teachers with limited surveys but not researched explicitly in the U.S. in a qualitative study. To the author's knowledge, the current study is the first to document teachers' narrative experiences in a longitudinal phenomenological survey documenting teachers' initial experience to recent experience with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on teacher morale in the U.S.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This heuristic phenomenological qualitative research study seeks to capture educators' perceptions of their lived experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's primary purpose is to document teachers' initial experience of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and their current experience to gain insight and the implication for teachers in how it affected their morale. This phenomenon affected educators worldwide, but this inquiry focuses on K-12 educators from public and private schools across the United States. In this chapter, the researcher reviews the methodology, data collection, and validity assurances enacted during this study.

Design

The heuristic phenomenological qualitative study design allows the experiences of both the researcher and the co-researchers to contribute to illuminating the impact of COVID-19 on teachers' morale. The goal is to comprehend better this phenomenon that is currently not understood. A constructivist viewpoint incorporates the researcher's background to shape the interpretation of my own experiences and that of other teachers (Moustakas, 1994). As an educator for the last twenty-five years and has taught during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research helps cultivate deeper insight through self-reflection and illuminate other teachers' rich, contextual narratives and how their morale was affected then and now. Semi-structured interviews of teachers from various public and private k-12 schools across the United States, teaching in March of 2020 when the pandemic began and still teaching, guide the study design.

In-depth descriptions of teaching through the pandemic produce awareness about the magnitude of this phenomenon on morale.

Phenomenological Framework

Using a phenomenological framework, the researcher conducts a research study to ascertain the educators' perspectives and capture the essence of their combined stories to provide new insights and truths surrounding a particular phenomenon. Phenomenology is a reflective process that aims to access the wisdom of co-researchers as they make sense of their lived experiences (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016). After immersing myself in the current setting at the onset of research, allowing time for reflection helps to understand how educators assign meaning to their own experiences (Daly, 2007). Then, attaining new awareness, the process of description and explanation begins (Daly, 2007). Finally, synthesizing and bringing together the individual stories of fellow educators helps to understand the meaning of their lived stories while taking a heuristic inquiry approach.

Heuristic Inquiry

The heuristic inquiry aims to find the underlying meaning of meaningful human experiences through interviewing others, "coresearchers," and self-inquiry (Mihalache, 2019). The heuristic qualitative research method allows me to research this phenomenon with educators who lived the same human experience to expand my understanding and add to the current evidence. The literal meaning of heuristic is the researcher's self in the process of discovery (Mihalache, 2019). The researcher's experience is essential, but the knowledge acquired experientially is incomplete without understanding other educators' experiences. This inquiry approach is beneficial because teacher morale during the pandemic is explicitly new territory

that hasn't been explored much; this approach provides a satisfying description of this essential human experience (Mihalache, 2019).

Constructivism

The constructivist approach realizes a shared knowledge between the researcher and co-researchers and aims to achieve an interpretive understanding of co-researchers' subjective meanings (Daly, 2007). Constructivists believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized perspectives on reality (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, the researcher presumes that individual educators construct different meanings based on their subjective experiences, so the researcher interprets the data from that perspective or lens. The validity procedures reflected in this thinking will present criteria such as trustworthiness and authenticity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As a result, the researcher develops the themes and patterns of thought found in the study.

Research Questions

The research questions used to conduct this study explore the following questions through a phenomenological heuristic framework:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale?

RQ2: What lingering consequences of COVID-19 continue to impact morale?

Setting

The setting for this study physically was Florida. However, it was essential to include teachers from school districts across the country; as in other states and districts, there was

variance in how restrictions, teacher expectations, closings, and reopening conditions were handled. Therefore, understanding the experiences of a wide variety of educators geographically was prudent for illuminating this phenomenon accurately. In addition, virtual interviews using online conferencing expanded the setting for the study.

Co-researchers

Co-researchers are teachers across the United States from public and private schools who taught full-time during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and who are still teaching. Both male and female teachers were interviewed with no age limitation. In addition, there was no limitation on the length of their teaching experience, grade level, or subject taught.

Two forms of sampling guided the co-researcher recruitment process. First, a convenience sample allowed the researcher to draw from the experiences of educators in the local schools in the Collier and Lee County School districts. The caution with convenience sampling is the lack of generability to the experience of educators across the United States (Krysik & Finn, 2018). The other recruitment strategy was the process of snowballing, which uses an informal referral process between colleagues to connect interested parties to the research (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016). Therefore, snowball sampling diversified the range of attitudes, behaviors, and other experiences relevant to this research from educators across the United States (Krysik & Finn, 2018; Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). In addition, word of mouth and recruitment efforts that included emails and information posted to teacher-based groups and associations nationwide allowed individuals to volunteer for the study or recommend others. Ideally, recruiting fifteen to twenty co-researchers for the study created an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018).

Procedures

This heuristic phenomenological qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of educators who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data and analyze the population's common themes, perceptions, and life experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Postmus, 2013). The semi-structured interview questions consisted of pre-determined questions to guide discussion and provide an opportunity to learn from co-researchers' perspectives, thoughts, and emotions. (Postmus, 2013).

First and foremost, this researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. Once consent was given, the researcher emailed individuals within her professional contacts. Potential co-researchers were screened to be sure that they met the selection criteria. Interviews of co-researchers were conducted online using Microsoft Teams to record them. As part of the interview introduction, the co-researcher was informed that they were recorded. No interview was conducted without confirming both written and verbal consent.

Co-researchers were recruited for this study using convenience sampling, emailing Collier and Lee County School District teachers an invitation letter with the IRB template. I also used convenience sampling, created a social media post on Facebook using the IRB template, and invited educators to participate in this study. Snowball sampling was another way co-researchers were recruited by asking co-researchers recruited through convenience sampling to provide names; The combination of convenience and snowball sampling gave the researcher the diversified sample desired for this study. Then, I facilitated informed consent, allowing co-researchers to gain information about the study (Harper & Thompson, 2012).

Achieving informed consent is when co-researchers understand the nature and purpose of the research (Harper & Thompson, 2012). After recruiting teachers, the researcher got written permission from the co-researchers. To gain consent, I emailed the co-researchers a welcome letter with a consent form, IRB approval letter, information sheet, and questionnaire informing them of their autonomy and confidentiality. Ethical issues may arise in managing the influence of relationship disclosures and identity because of the nature of the study. Still, the researcher put safeguards such as pseudonyms into place (Harper & Thompson, 2012). In addition, the researcher provided co-researchers with an explanation of how the information they provided will appear, and they were allowed to have control concerning terminating data without cause (Harper & Thompson, 2012). After the interview, there was time for an informal conversation to discuss the co-researcher's experience, and if there was any data they wanted to be terminated (Harper & Thompson, 2012).

Before meeting with the co-researchers for the interview, the researcher emailed them a questionnaire to establish foundational background information and data. This background information helped the researcher create themes and code while analyzing the interview data. At the initial meeting, there was a mutual understanding that these questions had already been covered and wouldn't be during the interview.

Questionnaire:

1. Please introduce yourself by stating your full name.
2. Explain how many years you have been a teacher.
3. Where do you teach? Name of school and the city and state located.
4. What grade and subject do you currently teach?

5. What grade and subject were you teaching at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020?
6. Did your teaching assignment change since pre-Covid-19?
7. What was your experience with technology in school pre-covid?
8. What is your current experience with technology in school?

During the scheduling of interviews, I clearly articulated what I would be asking during the interview and explanation of why the research was being conducted (Harper & Thompson, 2012). In addition, I explained to the co-researcher that the discussion is recorded on Microsoft Teams and the interview is confidential, using pseudonyms to keep anonymity. Participating is no reward or incentive; it will all be voluntary.

The interview had a few minutes of talking to put the research co-researcher at ease (Roberts, 2020) and remind them that the meeting was recorded using Microsoft Teams. The recording captured an audio transcript that was used later with NVivo. At the beginning of the meeting, the researcher started a live interview transcription. The text appeared alongside the meeting video in real-time. The researcher stopped recording the live transcript at the end of the interview and downloaded the transcript. The researcher then downloaded the transcript to the computer and NVivo for qualitative data analysis.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher has worked in education for twenty-five years and holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in secondary education and a Master of Arts in education: instruction and curriculum. She has served in various teaching capacities from 1st-12th grade, working primarily in secondary education for most of the time. Interest in the research topic occurred because of experiencing the phenomena alongside most other educators. As an educator, the researcher's

morale was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, from the initial closure of schools and the transition to a new way of educating students. While doing self-investigation and discovery, the researcher wanted to engage other educators who have lived through this phenomenon to gain a deeper understanding (Mihalache, 2019). Therefore, the researcher's relationship with the co-researchers is a professional relationship of educators who all experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher morale. The heuristic qualitative design is subjective, including the researcher's interpretation or judgment of the results. Therefore, bracketing enables the researcher's experiences to be included and creates awareness of how her experiences impact understanding of themes of the other co-researchers' experiences (Krysik & Finn, 2018).

Data Collection

This study used a semi-structured interview method. The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams. Questions were open-ended and cultivated rich descriptive narratives of the co-researchers' teaching experience during the onset of the pandemic, at the peak of school closures, and during the last year as most locations tried to gain normalcy. The interview was audio-recorded on Microsoft Teams. After recording, the researcher used the NVivo software program to transcribe and code the interviews.

Interviews

Interviewing is a method in qualitative research to broaden and deepen our knowledge by taking the co-researcher's experience to construct a composite understanding (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016; Postmus, 2013; Daly, 2007). For example, in a phenomenological interview, the researcher is not critiquing the co-researchers' answers, but explaining their stories is essential to make meaning (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016). As a part of the interview

process, the interviewer needs to take a self-inventory to understand their origins, biases, and understandings to better understand their shared experiences through the interview process (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016; Postmus, 2013; Daly, 2007). Another essential part of the interview process is establishing trust; it should continue if trust is set before the interview (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016; Postmus, 2013; Daly, 2007). The researcher considered these ideas to achieve rich and thick data from the co-researchers through the semi-structured interview questions. The researcher used semi-structured interview questions to give the interview some organization and structure (Daly, 2007). The semi-structured interview questions helped focus on the critical research questions that helped establish data analysis later (Daly, 2007).

Open-Ended Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Can you tell me about your teaching experiences and mindset before March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started?
2. How did you respond to the onset of the pandemic in March 2020?
3. How did the initial closure of schools affect your personal life, and did this influence your school life?
4. At the onset of the pandemic, where was your morale on a scale of 1-10? Tell me more about that and why you rate it at a.....
5. Describe how COVID-19 changed your preparation to deliver the learning environment to your students.
6. Tell me about your relationship with coworkers during the pandemic.

7. When you think about support during the transition into COVID-19, what/who provided the most care?
8. Tell about moments of angst about teaching under the restrictions of COVID-19.
9. As we moved further into the pandemic in the Fall of 2020, describe your morale at that point – on a scale of -10. Tell me more about that and why you rate it at a...
10. Are there particular factors of the work environment that you can pinpoint that influenced your morale during COVID-19?
11. What motivated you to continue teaching through the pandemic?
12. Describe the experience of returning to the traditional school setting in your location and school system.
13. As you go back and continue to develop more normalcy in the school setting, describe your morale – on a scale of a-10. Tell me more about that and why you rate it at a...
14. What have you learned about your morale when reflecting on the experience – starting, enduring the pandemic, and working towards normalcy?
15. We've covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I appreciate your time. What else would be essential about teacher morale that I haven't asked you?

Question one is the initial question to establish a foundation of the teacher's perspective of education before the pandemic, and it introduces the focus of the study (Roberts, 2020). The question extricates background information leading to the direction of the research questions (Yeong, Ismail, Ismail, & Hamzah, 2018). The question is broad and based on respondent recall, so the co-researcher can convey the aspects they feel are essential (Roberts, 2020; Yeong, Ismail, Ismail, & Hamzah, 2018). Establishing this first question allows the interviewer and co-

researcher to develop trust and reduces the perception of other questions as threatening (Roberts, 2020).

Questions two through fourteen are the main questions used to get the co-researchers to describe what they experienced teaching at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to education today (Roberts, 2020). These questions ask the co-researcher to explain what occurred and describe their experience in as much detail as they remember (Roberts, 2020). In addition, these questions were constructed to explore teachers' perceptions regarding the factors affecting teacher morale, the actual levels of teacher morale, and the predictors that are the study's primary purpose.

Question fifteen is a closing question. This question allows the co-researcher time to wind down, reflect, share additional information, and decompress from the more detailed questions (Roberts, 2020; Sowicz et al., 2019). Asking this closing question gives the co-researcher the opportunity if they want to share anything else (Sowicz et al., 2019). The open-endedness of the final question does not impose the theoretical or philosophical lens that may have informed the researcher's questions, giving the co-researcher more control (Sowicz et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

As the founder of the heuristic study, Moustakas says that the heuristic researcher's goal is to uncover as many meanings as possible about the phenomenon (Moustakas C., 1990). Moustakas suggests eight critical steps in analyzing data in a heuristic phenomenological study. The first step is to gather all the data from one co-researcher (Hyatt, 2011; Moustakas C., 1990). This researcher begins by taking the transcription from the first interview recorded on Microsoft

Teams, synthesizing the information, and downloading it to QDAS, NVivo, to organize and manage the data. This in-depth analysis using the NVivo software helped the researcher immerse into the material until it was understood; step two of Moustakas' steps in analyzing data (Moustakas C., 1990). NVivo helped uncover more by finding common themes and evidence-based insight, which helped with step three to construct an individual depiction of the experience. Next, steps four and five absorb the data from the interview and analyze if it contains the essential qualities and themes. During this process, this researcher shared the data with the co-researcher to affirm accuracy and to determine if there was anything that they would like to have deleted. After steps one through five had been completed for one co-researcher, the researcher continued to do this for all co-researchers until an individual depiction of each co-researcher's experience was constructed. Next, step six of Moustakas' steps is to develop a composite description of the universal qualities and themes of the experience internalized and understood by the researcher from this process. NVivo played a big part in this in-depth analysis by letting codes emerge to help identify patterns and themes. The next step, step seven, is to go back to the raw material of all co-researchers and construct individual portraits that best exemplify the dominant themes of the phenomenon investigated. The final step was the creative synthesis of the experience. At this point in the analysis, the researcher brought in their presence and knowledge that infused the research with personal, professional, and literary value. (Hyatt, 2011; Moustakas C., 1990).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study is the degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality (Connelly, 2016). Furthermore, are the conclusions that have

emerged from the analysis credible, defensible, and able to withstand alternative explanations (Krysik & Finn, 2018)? The framework for trustworthiness seeks to satisfy the four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. With credibility, it questions whether an accurate picture of the phenomenon is presented. The dependability criterion is if the work was to be repeated the same, would similar results be obtained? With confirmability, researchers prove that their findings come from the data, not their bias. Finally, with transferability, the reader decides if the conclusions can justifiably be applied to another similar study and setting (Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Triangulation and member checks were essential to building trustworthiness for the data analyzed in this study.

Credibility

To validate the qualitative data analysis conclusions, the researcher used the methods of triangulation and respondent validation or member checks (Krysik & Finn, 2018; Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). Triangulation uses multiple sources of data to compare and cross-check data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This researcher used an expert reviewer or triangulating analyst. The triangulation of having more than one reader look at the data helps ensure credibility. Member checks are another strategy this researcher used to ensure validity. Member check-in reviews the data results with the co-researchers of the research (Krysik & Finn, 2018; Connelly, 2016; Shenton, 2004). The perspective of colleagues and fellow educators, through triangulation and member check-in, helped the researcher from making assumptions. Demonstrating credibility goes some distance in ensuring dependability (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is when another researcher can follow the decision trail used by the researcher. This researcher plans to report the process within the study in detail, enabling a future researcher to repeat the work (Shenton, 2004; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). An audit trail was achieved by describing the specific purpose of the study; discussing how and why the co-researchers were selected for the study; explaining how the data was collected and how long the data collected lasted; describing how the data was reduced or transformed for analysis; discussing the interpretation and presentation of the research findings; and communicating the specific techniques used to determine the credibility of the data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). This researcher had peers participate in the analysis to ensure dependability. This researcher also wrote notes regarding personal biases following each interview. Additionally, the researcher asked for clarification of definitions and slang to allow the co-researcher to lead the interview direction (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Transferability

Transferability is the researcher demonstrating that the results of this work can be applied to a larger population (Shenton, 2004). The researcher needs to provide sufficient data to make transferability possible. The person reading the study decides whether they can apply the findings to their situation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). For the researcher to establish transferability for this study, taking careful consideration to explicitly describe the details of the organizations taking part in this study, the co-researchers and how many, the data collection

methods employed, the length of the data collection sessions, and the period over which the data was collected all were essential (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained before collecting data. Then, research co-researchers filled out an informed consent form to indicate their voluntary participation in the study. The researcher used pseudonyms for all co-researchers to ensure privacy. The recordings on Microsoft Teams were downloaded and securely stored on my computer, with me being the only one to have access unless requested to be shared by the co-researcher. The data was protected on Microsoft Teams using encryption and other security best practices. Co-researchers were informed that participating in this study was voluntary, and they could review the data and remove anything they didn't want to be included.

Summary

This phenomenological heuristic study aims to understand the experience of educators teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using phenomenological interviewing, I conducted interviews gathering lived experience descriptions from the educators keeping the phenomenological question at the heart of inquiry (Van Manen, 2014). Using Moustakas' eight critical steps in analyzing data in a heuristic phenomenological study (Moustakas C., 1990), analysis was done on the educator's experiential narratives (Van Manen, 2014). Following a framework to ensure trustworthiness is of utmost consideration in this study keeping credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in mind to maintain validity and demonstrate an

accurate picture of the phenomenon (Shenton, 2004). Also, ethical consideration was at the forefront of this researcher's preparation for this study since working with humans.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents the findings and describes the data collection process for theme development. This heuristic phenomenological qualitative research study aims to gain insight into the educators' perceptions of their lived experience teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's main aim is to document teachers' initial experience of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and their current experience to gain insight and the implication for teachers in how it affected their morale. This phenomenon affected educators worldwide, but this inquiry focuses on K-12 educators from public and private schools across the United States. This chapter highlights the themes that emerged from the individual depictions of the interview analysis with the educators. The author changed the co-researchers' names to protect their identities.

The phenomenological qualitative case study included eighteen educators from six different states. The interviewees in this study were male and female educators aged 26-59 years old with 3-32 years of teaching experience.

The table below gives the demographic information of the co-researchers in the study.

Table 1

Co-researchers Demographics

Co-researcher	Age	Years Teaching	Subject/Grade	State
Carolyn	41	17	7th-grade Civics	Florida
Celine	44	17	Reading 9-12	Florida
Debbie	45	11	Reading 9-12	Florida
Delilah	50	10	Biology 8th grade	Florida
Diamond	24	3	1st-3rd grade	Missouri
Gabriela	48	11	HS Self Contained	Arizona
John	51	26	Technology	Florida
Katherine	59	5	7th grade English	Florida
Laney	59	14	10 grade Science	Florida
Laura	55	14	2nd grade	Florida
Leslie	37	16	AICE English, AP English	Florida
Madison	44	17	Geometry, Stats 9-12	Idaho
Michelle	56	32	Intervention Specialist 9th grade	Ohio
Nancy	44	15	10th grade English	Florida
Ryan	46	7	Kindergarten	Washington
Sara	26	3	9-12 ESE English	Florida
Taylor	27	7	Pre-Calc/Alg. 2, 9-12	Florida
Veronika	43	17	Kindergarten	Washington

The onset of the pandemic happened over two years previous to this study. COVID permanently changed the education trajectory; however, the co-researchers could still recollect the emotions and feelings associated with it. As the educators reflected during the interview, many memories and stories emerged.

Results

After receiving approval, this researcher began searching nationwide for educators to interview. The teachers came from six different states, both male and female, at varying levels of their teaching careers. After interviewing the teachers and recording the transcript on Teams, I emailed the transcript to each teacher to evaluate and make changes if they desired. Once the teachers approved all transcripts, I emailed the transcripts and essay draft to a peer educator for expert review. The expert reviewer has been in the field for over twenty years, and she checked for the accuracy of the theme development. The interview transcription, recorded on Microsoft Teams, was downloaded to QDAS, NVivo, to organize and manage the data and synthesize the information. This in-depth analysis using the NVivo software helped me to code the interviews and immerse myself in the material until I understood how it related to the research questions and then developed the themes.

Theme Development

Five dominant themes emerged from the data collected that gave insight into the research questions. This researcher developed the themes by evaluating the data on NVIVO and coding. The dominant areas stood out from the teacher responses that created the five themes. I chose the theme of finding identity at work from many similar responses that affected teacher morale that I thought would better illuminate their experience. I broke this theme into two sub-themes: relationships with coworkers and relationships with the administration, to analyze that data closer for more detail on how identity is formed. Another emerging theme was challenges to virtual transition and how it affected morale. In every school nationwide, teachers' morale was

affected by this sudden transition to virtual after COVID-19 began, and the recurring conversations with educators revealed the effect. Another theme that surfaced was the challenges of interacting with students. All of the teachers had stories of how new challenges arose teaching during the pandemic; through coding their information, this unfolded how their experience was affected. All teachers discussed their motivation for continuing teaching when coding the data; this led to adding the theme of motivation for continuing as an essential piece of data from their transcripts. Acclimating in a post-pandemic era is another theme that materialized since this study aimed to gain the educators' perception of their lived experience teaching during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The five themes that are the focus of this analysis revealed knowledge and understanding of this study.

Finding Identity at Work

Two sub-themes emerged when evaluating the data on finding identity at work: relationships with coworkers and the administration. Even though the administrative staff are coworkers, they play different roles in the lives of educators. Moreover, since the administration is leadership, there is a specific expectation of support that a teacher doesn't expect from their fellow educators. The proceeding research highlights a teacher's identity in evaluating these relationships.

Relationships with Coworkers

Relationships with coworkers created moments of angst for some teachers, affecting their morale. When returning to school, teachers stayed away and self-isolated to a degree. The

interviews highlighted that the pandemic became very political with an "us vs. them" mentality that formed among staff. This mentality created moments of angst and distrust among some teachers. While with other teachers, a camaraderie developed as some teachers grew closer, knowing they were in this together.

When some teachers returned to school, the world was still in the middle of the pandemic, with new information being released daily on what healthy protocols looked like in public. These protocols included wearing masks, being vaccinated for COVID-19, constantly sanitizing areas, and social distancing. Some school districts and teachers nationwide were reluctant to return because of these protocols. An example of this was when Debbie stated, "there were impediments to planning and collaboration because you didn't just pop into a room and plan with another teacher as you used to." Teachers being unable to talk easily captured the difficulties of not being close to teachers and how they became self-isolated. Another example was when John discussed how he felt the staff suffered from not being around each other and not being able to see people daily. He stated, "You were on your own. At first, we had our maybe weekly meetings, but those were difficult with microphone issues and crazy discussions, but otherwise, you didn't see anyone; you didn't have any contact." Then, when educators tried to collaborate, a teacher might be sick or have issues with their zoom, so it was difficult to collaborate effectively. Diamond discussed this in her interview, "sometimes the teachers were sick, so when they got together, they would practice social distancing because it wasn't known how comfortable people were with getting together." They also practiced social distancing among grade levels, so, as a new teacher, Diamond didn't get to know anyone else in her school that year. There was an overwhelming sense that these teachers wanted to get things back to

normal, but they all had varying degrees of how comfortable they were and how this would look. Being intentional about creating and maintaining relationships with other teachers became more effortful and essential.

All over the nation, the pandemic created a division of an "us vs. them" mentality. This division is seen in every public space: the masked vs. unmasked, vaccinated vs. the unvaccinated. But unfortunately, this division was also seen among teachers in schools nationwide. The wearing of masks in school was very controversial. Leslie stated, "when we came back, I think everyone had different ideas and health situations with people in their home and their families and with different beliefs regarding the pandemic." The divide that it created became more apparent, and some teachers quit their job over the vaccination policy. Ryan stated in her interview, "because of the vaccine, we lost some people, we lost our school nurse, she resigned." Teachers who once were pleasant with each other started to turn on each other. In Carolyn's interview, she discussed "how a real pack mentality began to form at her school; teachers stated that the unvaccinated deserved what they got if they didn't get vaccinated." This political divide among teachers caused a lot of anxiety and exhaustion as close friends became divided. In Ryan's interview, she elaborated on how this affected her school and colleagues. Ryan stated:

We could not seem to communicate without offending, and it felt like some people would try to speak very carefully, but others did not have ears for anything but their stance. So it became rigid and ugly, and some people didn't know where people stood, and so they didn't understand that you are putting the person in front of you down with your words

right now, and this is not a safe place. I had some friends who suffered from mental health during that time. But, even trying to reach out, it was difficult to reach them. There was so much fear among some people, and they were so stuck in that, that they would isolate themselves. It felt disjointed and yucky, and honestly, it heightened some of our toxicity and dysfunction within our school system, particularly our building. It's almost like you added yeast to it; it just grew, and it was uncomfortable. It felt like everyone was a little paranoid because it got kind of back-biting; these people, you know, you would have considered your family, and it just didn't feel safe, not because of the virus, but how everyone was handling it.

The division the pandemic caused created paranoia among colleagues. Laney also shared an example of how the growing paranoia impacted her: "I kept away from the people that were paranoid because it got me too anxious, and I couldn't afford that; so, I stayed close to colleagues that shared my same beliefs." How teachers handled this controversy and political divide also brought some colleagues closer together as they formed bonds based on similar beliefs.

While there was paranoia among educators, other teachers found creative ways to support each other and collaborate. Teachers emailed, texted, and had zoom meetings, FaceTime, and Google Meet; they found different ways to see each other and interact. Gabriela illustrated how her department tried to be together virtually, saying, "my ESE department felt strong as a unit, spending over five hours a day on Teams or our phones sharing curriculum and tears." Even though there was a division among the staff, teachers discussed in their interviews how they came together and divided and conquered to get things done. Katherine illustrated this by stating,

"my colleague and I were on the phone daily; 'We were thick as thieves.' I figured out how to do this assignment and then shared it, and they would share with me, so we figured out how to do that early on." Some educators agreed that we are all in this together; these teachers regularly shared their thoughts and strategies. Veronika stated:

She talked to the other kindergarten teacher all the time, and the experience bonded them because they felt like they were "kind of in this together." She felt her coworkers were just trying to lift each other up because they felt so blessed that they were back in school while other schools in Washington state were still working from home.

The pandemic caused division among teachers, but it also provided healing and an opportunity for teachers to unite during this time. Whether teachers felt they were on an island during this time or bonded together, there were strong opinions on how successful the administration was in supporting them and handling procedures.

Administration

When discussing the support teachers received from administration during the pandemic at the district and school level, responses varied based on where they lived in the country and even what school they worked at in the same state or district. Some teachers felt supported at the school level and not the district level. Other teachers felt the opposite; they appreciated what the district was mandating but felt that their school administration didn't handle it well. Teachers feeling supported ranged from having a voice to visually seeing administrators. However, the

consistent theme among educators and their relationship with the administration is that leadership is critical to their morale.

Administration plays a vital role in how a teacher's morale is affected and in finding their identity in the workplace. Unfortunately, some teachers felt unsupported, even in the same school district, and expectations were overwhelming. Regarding morale, Laney expounded on how administrator expectations were too much for her, and without support, she considered ending her career early because of the stress. Celine explained, "There are still teachers in our school district with low morale because their leadership wasn't as good as ours." What defined leadership as being good varied, but one mentioned frequently was visually seeing the administrator. Michelle illustrated this when she discussed her administration and how she never saw them; "they would just email if something came up." Having an administrator always visual was important to Gabriela's morale as well. Gabriela explained that she changed schools in the same district during the pandemic. At her new school, administrators were visible every day, and at her other school, it was maybe once every two weeks, so their presence made a big difference in feeling supported. At her new school, they also sent out a survey every quarter, asking what they could improve, which made her think that her opinion mattered. Feeling that their opinion mattered during this time was also frequently mentioned.

Teachers want to feel that the administration cares about what they think and how they feel, especially during a time as complicated as the pandemic. However, administrators set expectations without listening to how this affected the teacher. Katherine illustrated this when she explained, "There was no support. It was more like complaining that we were doing it wrong

rather than here's what the expectation is, and here's how we can do it better; what do you think?" Listening to and giving them autonomy was essential to teachers during the pandemic.

Administrators who listened to teachers and gave them the freedom to do their job during the pandemic had much more positive experiences in their relationship with their teachers. Madison illuminated how her principal's support affected her morale in the interview when she stated:

When you have leadership that understands education, how to be a teacher, respects the teacher, trusts the teacher, does not micromanage, keeps you in the know, and keeps you accountable for your actions. Even through the difficulties of COVID when we did have different opinions. You know, dealing with the masks, vaccinations, and those things that can pull you apart; we just decided we're not going to talk about it. We don't have a standard where you have to do this one thing: this is something that your family can decide; this is something mom and dad can decide; this is not something that we will choose as a body.

Giving teachers autonomy allowed the morale to be better even when they're going through that difficulty. So, leadership is essential when discussing a teacher's morale.

Some teachers appreciated that this was completely new territory universally and expressed empathy and understanding of their administration's challenges. Having an administrator with a positive attitude changed how the school looked. John described this by stating, "the principal and his positivity greatly impacted teachers feeling supported. He helped

us get what we needed but never tried to overwhelm us; it was impressive." The mutual empathy and understanding between the administration and educators during this time helped teachers to feel supported. Delilah said, "our administration was supportive because they knew this was trial and error for everyone; nobody was an expert." Teachers positively affected by their administrators and how they handled their job during the pandemic realized that they were struggling too. Everyone was just trying to navigate this new educational trajectory.

Challenges to Virtual Transition

For many teachers, teaching online full-time was not expected, and there were many obstacles to overcome. For one, the time commitment of creating lessons. Then, learning the new technology started a huge learning curve with this new technology that everyone was required to use. Also, making sure everyone had the proper technology. Finally, the most challenging obstacle for teachers to overcome was using it with the students to teach the curriculum like they would in the classroom.

The time commitment for creating online lessons varied from teacher to teacher, depending on where they taught and their position, but the universal theme among them was the added stress this brought to their lives. Debbie explained that this became an extreme time commitment, working every weekend to build the lessons and detailed modules needed online. In addition, most teachers that went online taught both synchronous and asynchronous, and some of them tried to teach in person. For example, Ryan, who worked in a rural school in Washington state, said, "even though they were doing school online, I had to have Google Classroom and packets prepared for students. If I didn't do both, it meant no learning for some families, so it felt

like having two jobs." Some teachers taught more than one grade level or more than one subject, which added even more work to prepare the online lessons. Gabriela explained that she was working 14-16 hours a day to try and keep up with the demands of teaching three different grade levels simultaneously and the documentation required by the district to complete. In addition to the time commitment for lessons was the additional training teachers needed to continue teaching and how prepared they were to do so.

There was a noticeable learning curve for the new online learning platforms that some teachers could adapt to more quickly than others. In addition, the onset of the pandemic forced everyone into a crash course in the computer skills needed to teach the curriculum. Nancy discussed that "it was kind of scary because we went from an antiquated way of teaching, putting everything on paper, to technologically advanced all at once." However, the time constraints for learning are what affected teachers the most. Michelle explained that at her school, it was pandemonium because they had one day to prepare before going online. Madison also stated it was the time constraints of learning something that they had never done before that was difficult. Still, no matter what age or level of experience they had working with technology, it caused morale to decrease considerably. For example, on a scale of 1-10, Taylor stated that her morale went from a 10 to a 4 when she suddenly had to move from in-classroom teaching to virtual. For Celine, she described it as going from a 10 to a 6 because of the challenge of learning the new technology and trying to help train others unfamiliar with it. Besides being unfamiliar with the technology platforms, some teachers didn't have the computers available in their homes to meet the requirements needed.

Transitioning to online learning was difficult, but additional stress occurred when teachers didn't have the proper hardware to do their job. Veronika stated:

Transitioning to online learning was difficult because she only had an old computer at home, and it was too slow for the curriculum, so she had to purchase a new computer that she shared with her son. This transition was overwhelming and caused a lot of stress and angst; her morale dropped to a 4 or 5 from a 10.

It wasn't just having a computer or the proper hardware; teachers that lived in rural areas had slow internet, so they had to learn to be patient. For example, Carolyn described her morale as a 10 before the virtual transition, but learning to overcome the slow internet obstacle dropped her morale from a 10 to a 5. It wasn't that teachers didn't use the computer before the pandemic, but using it as a sole form of teaching was a new obstacle.

The most prominent obstacle teachers discussed overcoming with the virtual transition was how to teach the curriculum like they would in the classroom. Teachers at all grade levels liked doing many hands-on projects, small groups, and paper and pencil assignments. However, teachers at different levels had different struggles.

Some teachers in the elementary grades struggled with how to keep the students engaged. For example, Veronika explained that zoom classes weren't happening with five-year-olds, so she had to switch to prerecording lessons. "I had to pretend that someone was answering me, and say things like 'what do you think,' 'that's right' I felt like Dora the Explorer talking to a camera and not children." Another teacher, Diamond, who taught second grade, said: "that most teachers

wouldn't acclimate and gave their students paper packets." Though Diamond's team thought having their students do their assignments online was essential, preparing them for the new trajectory in education. At the secondary level, there were different issues of engagement.

The secondary teachers interviewed felt that online teaching took away their drive and passion because the lessons lacked personal interaction. Taylor described her morale and stated, "once teaching through virtual started, my confidence dropped because I lost that personal interaction teaching everything through videos and a computer." Personal interaction was complicated when teaching through a computer. Madison elaborated on this:

I went into teaching to connect with the students. That's one of the reasons I love being at a Christian School; we can interact with our students in and outside of the classroom, and then they're not there anymore. So I would do things almost daily, giving extra credit if they sent a picture of themselves with a sibling, their mom, or a tree; just giving me a picture because I missed seeing their faces.

Seeing the students' faces during that time was essential to all teachers. Laney and Delilah, two secondary science teachers, talked about teaching science with online labs was new and stressful to them. However, Laney found many resources that teachers had created for online labs, which she found helpful. Though Delilah struggled with "looking at students as little tiles on a screen, feedback wasn't evident because I didn't see the immediate feedback on what I was instructing. That made it difficult to gauge if the students were interested in what I was teaching." The struggle for teachers was not knowing if they engaged their students in learning.

With some students being synchronous and others being asynchronous, it was difficult for teachers to gauge if the students understood the curriculum. In addition, everyone was keeping crazy hours, and students were turning in assignments at 11:59 p.m. or emailing at all times. Also, Madison explained that most students came online infrequently, so she would just sit there for hours waiting for them, or they would just log in every couple of days. The infrequency of students logging in was a difficult obstacle for teachers because when they aren't physically with them, they can't gauge their learning or make them do the work, so many students just fell off the grid. Katherine illustrates this:

Unfortunately, I did not get to have one-on-one time with each of my students. Most of my angst came from the kids who did not log on. I finally got through to a couple of parents, and we arranged phone calls for me to work through things with their kids. But, even when I could work one-on-one with students, these were struggling students because I had the intensive group that year. So these were kids that were not grasping things anyway. Students, left to their own devices, are not even trying to learn anything anymore.

Teachers teaching online at all levels were frustrated with the transition to online. Then came transitioning from full-time online to back to the classroom, which led to new obstacles affecting teacher morale. The most prominent challenge teachers faced was interacting with the students after they had been learning virtually.

Challenges Interacting with Students

As teachers returned to school, they all expressed a definite excitement to be back with students again. The angst came with not knowing how to interact with the students, as they sat at their tables, on a computer, and wearing a mask; this was depressing for teachers. In addition, teachers expressed concern about how they would interact with the students when health concerns were looming. Then, another matter arose, how much technology should be a part of the classroom now that the students are used to learning virtually? The analysis revealed how returning to the school after students did not have the typical structure online added a new level of anxiety that affected their morale.

Transitioning back into the classroom with students wearing masks, facing forward with no groups, and being six feet apart was challenging. There were new obstacles teachers hadn't anticipated that came with the initial return to the classroom. Leslie stated:

It was great to be back with the kids when they were still teaching online in other parts of the country. But morale decreased. We were excited to come back initially, but then it dropped as the year went on because the students were sad that many traditional activities weren't there and some of their friends weren't in school. So then, putting the students in rows and socially distanced, they couldn't collaborate. As an AP teacher, College Board had team projects submitted as part of their AP grade. So, it was sad to see this collaboration go away. So, my morale decreased to a six from when they initially returned; it was much higher.

Teachers had to figure out new ways they would interact with their students and how they would have their students interact with each other. Social distancing and keeping up with the mask protocols were difficult, and each school handled it differently. Madison, a teacher in Idaho, explained they were among the first states to quit using masks after returning. Their morale was high after returning, and they figured out masks as they went. Compared to the two states that Idaho borders, Oregon and California, they kept the students wearing masks longer than any other state. A teacher in Florida, Delilah, expressed how wearing the mask lowered her morale, "It was hard to breathe in the mask, and it would get hot, and I would sweat, and sweat and sweat. Then, a student would lower their masks because they were hot too and had difficulty complying because they had been home doing what they wanted. I struggled mentally; I wanted to quit my job; it was challenging." Maintaining proximity to students is essential for a teacher to build relationships and have good classroom management. Diamond described how this gave her so much anxiety: She didn't have to wear a mask if she kept her distance from the children, so she stayed far from the kids so she could breathe and teach; that caused a lot of issues with her classroom management. How do you create a community in the classroom and bond with your students when there is minimal interaction? As a result, teaching was much more challenging because of the human element involved in education. Carolyn explained, "there was very little interaction; to me, that was depressing, and I didn't care for it." Other teachers felt the same way upon return. They were glad to be back, but having little interaction with the students was disheartening. Taylor stated:

So the administration had said that we had to make videos, and we were only allowed to show the videos in the classroom. So, we couldn't even teach outside of showing a video.

So I made a video for every lesson and class during my off-work time. And to make it extensive in detail, I had to explain the task. So I'd write the notes and record myself talking through many examples. Making a 20-minute video explaining the lesson and reviewing different assignments would take me a while. Then, during the class, I would just show the video. It was depressing not having that interaction."

When teachers first returned, others had similar experiences with how much interaction with the students was acceptable. Most of the teachers explained that the expectation was that interaction should be at a minimum and everything should be on the computer; Laney illustrates this:

We were asked not to have any contact with the kids and to stay away. So it was like everybody was separated from everybody because we couldn't be close to other people. I am a very caring teacher and care about relationships with my students. So I had to sit back and see them from afar. I could not come close to them or approach them or anything. And that was bad for my morale.

There was more angst for teachers not being with their students than being back in school.

Though specific protocols were challenging to overcome.

Despite all health concerns and protocols, having students in the classroom was much better than having them online. Teachers had to stick to regulations that forced them to social distance students even though they were wearing masks. Every school had different variations of the expectations, but all schools had these protocols to some degree when the students first returned. Ryan explained that this new way of doing things felt robotic because the students had

to be socially distanced and couldn't touch each other. Teachers wondered how close to put students and what was too close not to make the students feel uncomfortable or get sick. Celine described, "teachers didn't want to harm anyone and make them sick based on their decision. So, the angst was there because they were learning how to handle the situation." Working in a private school added extra angst for the teachers. Veronika explained how the public schools weren't open in Washington state yet, but their school was, so their enrollment increased. She stated:

They had to stick to the regulations of children sitting feet apart and social distancing. They had to take their temperature every morning and retake it if a child sneezed or coughed. They had plastic dividers and masks, which didn't allow for socialization and desk groups. "We were under everyone's microscopes, and all that responsibility was on our shoulders, which caused so much worry; if we did anything wrong, they would shut down the whole school.

Not knowing the transmission rate or how COVID could spread caused some teachers to take extra precautions. Gabriella stated: she would have the papers the students handed in, in a basket for a week before viewing and mainly had them do an online curriculum instead. If a student coughed or sneezed before COVID-19, nobody worried about it; now, everyone was suddenly concerned if they were going to die or carry germs to grandma at home that may die. So, something like teaching, which already can be stressful, was amplified. Nancy explained that as happy she was about being back in class, her health concerns were at the top of her mind daily. "When I looked in my classroom, and I would see my students, a lot of times, I didn't think that

the students were taking it as seriously as I thought they should be." The health concerns were an obstacle, but navigating when to let students use their devices was another.

Teachers and students returning to the classroom after using some form of technology at home became dependent on technology in the classroom. They were returning to an environment that should seem familiar but wasn't because of the student engagement and all of them being on computers. Debbie explained how this increased her frustration and made her morale "very, very low" from an 8.5 on a ten-point scale before the pandemic. The students expected to be allowed to be on their devices because they got used to doing it virtually. Using devices was a challenge while trying to reestablish structure.

Students not having a daily structure made it difficult for some students when they returned to school. Students had so much free time at home with little supervision it was hard to keep them on task. As a result, some of them forget how to act and follow the rules, affecting their learning. Sara illustrated this when she stated:

The students constantly interrupted and showed terrible behavior, such as not wearing a mask and following all the rules; it was just a lot. I had students with ADD and ADHD who couldn't focus with their masks on their faces. Some students had autism but were high functioning, but they still couldn't deal with a mask. I also feel like the mask was difficult for the general education student. It led to losing humanity because they couldn't even see you smile or have mad faces. These kids did not know how to interact with human beings; because of the mask and technology.

This lack of structure for students created a more significant gap between learners. Most of the upper group thrived, but some moved into the middle, and the middle and bottom groups had a prominent slide that still affects students today.

Motivation for Continuing

After experiencing something as stressful as the pandemic, teachers' answers were similar to why they continued teaching. Even though there were various responses, the consensus among teachers is that teaching has daily challenges. For some, their motivation is the same reason they got into the career, their love for children. Others stay because of a paycheck or because they are too far invested. Still, you must have a passion for being in education, or you won't be able to stay in this career very long. As a result, some teachers considered or did quit after the pandemic, and others overcame it.

Making connections and building relationships with students is why most of us enter this profession. Overcoming obstacles is a part of life; how a teacher perceives them is shown by how their morale is affected. The students needed teachers there; they needed support and to go back to some type of normalcy. Veronika explained that was her only motivation, "Who would love them? Who was going to remind them that God loved them? Who would shower them with the joy they should be feeling from being at school?" The education field is constantly evolving, and there will always be challenges to overcome. Nancy discussed in the interview that once she learned these new instructional platforms, she saw it as an opportunity to open new doors in instruction. Similarly, Laura discussed that after she got over "wanting to throw her computer out the window," it boosted her self-esteem and made her more confident as a teacher. But, then,

others were too negatively affected, so they decided they couldn't continue. As a new teacher, Sara knew she had to quit, and the paycheck was the only thing keeping her. Sara admits that she didn't know if COVID was the only reason she was leaving education, but she did believe it was why she was quitting so quickly. Sara stated, "teaching during COVID exhausted me quicker, so I guess part of me wants to say COVID wasn't the only cause, but I think it was the flashlight that made me realize it isn't the career for me." Other teachers who felt similar to Sara stayed, negatively affecting their morale.

Others, even though they had a passion for what they were doing, were too far invested in changing careers or needed job security, and money was the only thing that kept them going. For example, John explains how he tries to be a happy person, but teaching under the restrictions of the pandemic made him question if he should stick with it, and he has been doing it for over 25 years. After teaching for so long, knowing that retirement was around the corner was his motivation. Similarly, Katherine said she legitimately enjoys teaching, but finances kept her going because the red tape during COVID was too much. Unfortunately, there are teachers whose job security is their motivation, adversely affecting their morale.

Most teachers' leading motivator is being there for the students and seeing them learn and grow. However, learning to acclimate in a post-pandemic era was a challenge that even the most optimistic teachers had difficulties overcoming.

Acclimating in a Post-Pandemic Era

Overall, teachers stated that their morale is up, and the new trajectory in education seems relevant to what is happening everywhere today. Even though teachers' confidence was negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they had to learn new teaching strategies, they also learned new ways to cope, which positively affected their morale. Meanwhile, some teachers feel that education is still recovering and doesn't go away overnight. Over time, teachers feel they have gained a better perspective on COVID-19 and a better perspective on themselves as educators.

While teachers are trying to acclimate to the new expectations in education, they learned a lot about how this affects their morale and new ways to cope. Debbie explained that when things weren't predictable, and new systems were not in order, it negatively impacted her morale. While reflecting, most teachers explained that once they overcame the difficulties of teaching with these new platforms, they felt positive about themselves as educators. Overcoming challenges is always tricky, but teachers learned they could only control their reactions to situations. Carolyn described how she copes by turning off all the noise to clear her mind when chaos breaks around her. Teachers learned to be flexible to adapt and overcome significant obstacles to keep their morale up. Delilah clarified that she just teaches one day at a time now and tries not to make rash decisions. If she encounters a problem, she typically takes the time needed to figure out how to fix it so it doesn't lower her morale. While learning to cope, teachers felt morale was up, but we are still recovering in education.

All of America is facing a tremendous national teacher shortage. Many teachers didn't feel supported during the pandemic by the school and district mandates or society. Schools removed and lifted mask restrictions and COVID procedures, but certain expectations on teachers didn't go away with the end of the pandemic. Katherine explained that at her school, they no longer have tape on the floor telling them what side of the hallway to walk on, but different expectations from administration and parents didn't go away. Another teacher, Nancy, described it as a heavy burden now for teachers and that administration needs to reevaluate the expectations on teachers in a post-pandemic era. The recovery process is slow, and the exhaustion doesn't go away overnight. Teachers have been overworked for over two years and are just trying to get back into a well-balanced life. Ryan stated, "it's difficult, and I think there's scar tissue from what we all went through." The impact of these lingering consequences is still there, and teachers are strategizing and learning to cope in this new era of education.

Heuristic Reflection

My experience teaching during the pandemic inspired the research for this study. Listening to the co-researchers' narratives during the interviews confirmed assumptions; as I reflected, I continued to compare my experience with theirs. Some reports were relatable regarding finding identity at work, but their struggle slightly differed from mine. Again, though, challenges to virtual and interacting were very relatable for me and confirmed my assumption. Consistently, I aligned with their motivation to continue and how they acclimate in a post-pandemic era. Hearing the stories of the co-researchers both confirmed and challenged the assumptions I had as a researcher.

Finding identity at work after returning, I related to stories teachers shared about their relationships with coworkers. When we returned in the fall of 2020, there was still a lot of fear, so everyone was isolated in their classrooms all day. Teachers didn't eat in the staff lounge or collaborate unless it was through email. It felt strange and impersonal as everyone wore masks, and in-person communication was minimal. Staff meetings were held online in a Teams format, and everyone didn't log in so you could see their face. Near the end of the school year and the start of the fall of 2021, districts lifted mask restrictions, and division among coworkers became apparent. I, as well as other teachers, kept their personal beliefs to themselves to not create division. Still, it became evident as time passed who were the masked, unmasked, vaccinated, and unvaccinated. I didn't experience any loss of friendships because I typically choose to align myself with people at work who share similar beliefs, but listening to other educators' narratives opened my eyes to the political divide that happened. As a social person, this hurt my morale. Consequently, teachers expressed in their interviews that having the administration's support also affected this.

At my school, the administration was continually showing us their support. Whether it was updating us on current protocols, being proactive with sick students, sanitizing our classrooms, or respecting us as educators not to micromanage. I knew this was unprecedented, and I knew my administration was doing its best, and I felt they reciprocated the assertion through their words and actions. Nobody knew what the answers were; masks, no masks, sanitizing rooms, the distance of children to each other, and the distance of children to the teacher. As I listened to the other teachers and their narratives, the teachers that felt support from the administration influenced their morale, as I believe it did mine. The only frustration I

experienced with administration, which was mandated from the district level, was teaching synchronous, asynchronous, and in person simultaneously.

The virtual transition in the spring of 2020 was initially stressful. Then we were mandated to teach in the fall of 2021, in person, synchronous and asynchronous, which negatively impacted my morale. During the 2019-2020 school year, our school had explained that the learning platform we were using, Angel, would no longer be available by the end of the school year, and we were transitioning to Canvas. They had discussed that year that we should become familiar with Canvas to start implementing it during the next school year. I looked at it, but with my curriculum on the other platform and all of the other requirements that go with teaching daily, I hadn't taken the time to learn Canvas. Then, spring break of 2020 and COVID-19 required us to stay home and teach virtually on Canvas for the remainder of the school year. Our school district gave us some time and tutorials to set things up, and then the students returned online. I learned how to use the platform reasonably quickly, but teaching the curriculum for the rest of the year was challenging. The two most significant stressors for me: knowing that the students were turning in their original work and continuing relationships with students when you don't see or talk to them daily. One of the ways a teacher monitors what their students know is through daily interaction with their students; the other is through formal and informal assessments. It was complicated to understand if the student was cheating with a friend or a book in hand to assess if they were learning. Then, in the fall of 2020, when our district decided to return in person, another layer of stress was added with teaching synchronously, asynchronously, and in person simultaneously.

As defined in chapter 1, synchronous is a direct interaction between students and teachers while simultaneously using online forms such as conferences and online chats (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). Asynchronous, as defined in chapter 1, learning indirectly using an independent learning approach (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). My asynchronous students were learning the same material as the in person and synchronous students. Still, they were not required to log into their classroom at a particular time, though they were responsible for the exact due dates. Returning to the classroom was difficult enough following protocol mandates of masks, sanitization of desks, and teaching through the Canvas platform. However, doing all three forms of teaching felt like having three jobs at times. I was thankful to be back, as other teachers interviewed expressed. Still, I became a teacher because I enjoy the relationships I build with my students, and that wasn't there with the online students.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was interacting effectively with students. At the initial transition, the challenge was engaging all your students now that they were all online. The only benefit at that time was that I had built relationships with my students because they had been in class with me for eight months before the online transition. The following year, when we offered the students three options, to come back in person, synchronous or asynchronous, it was much harder to get to know the online students. I was able to build relationships with students that returned to school. It was almost impossible to teach the students in a synchronous or asynchronous classroom; they rarely logged in, and if they did, they didn't want to show their picture, so you didn't even know if it was them. As an educator, I like to do group projects and make things seem as normal as possible for the students in the classroom. One of the projects I enjoy is the students doing a mock trial to go along with the literature they are reading. The

online students could only participate by logging in, watching, and playing the part of jurors; they couldn't participate as their classmates did. Not forming a previous relationship with the online students; when they didn't turn anything in, I tried to call and discuss it, but many of them fell through the cracks. Then, with testing, they had such an unfair advantage or disadvantage because they were capable, but the majority would cheat on tests while the other students had to take it in front of me in class. Students in the class were jealous because they knew their online classmates had this unfair advantage. Then, students were allowed to go back and forth between in person, synchronous, and asynchronous. We had to extend due dates, ignore due dates, and have students email and turn things in at all hours of the day. It was highly stressful and had a tremendous impact negatively on my morale. Then, when the students returned last year, fall of 2021, they were all required to be in person. Returning was good, but the negative impact from the virtual transition to the first year in person to full-time in person in 2021 has teachers still seeing the effects in the classroom today.

Teaching in a post-pandemic era, which started in the 2021-2022 school year and continues today, many things are influencing a teacher's morale. As teachers expounded on their narratives, their experiences confirmed my assumptions as a researcher of the adverse effects seen in the classroom today. Many teachers discussed how students are behind academically, and they attributed it to that year and a half of virtual teaching. I have seen that in my classroom this year, with cheating being worse than ever. They have become so used to sharing their work on social media online that it is difficult to find new techniques to divert the temptation to cheat using the current technology. I also have students' isolation from their peers affected their mental health and emotionally put them behind where students in previous years were. As a

teacher, trying to empathize with where they are mentally and wanting to bring them to where students were previously is emotionally and mentally taxing. Students' fear of presenting assignments or projects in front of their peers is something I never faced to this extent. Trying to teach the students to have integrity, and to take ownership of their work, is a concept that they struggle with, as they are all just trying to get an A. They don't see cheating as a problem and will boldly explain that they all do it. The quick shift during the pandemic to virtual learning and technology as the platform for the new trajectory of teaching is creating a generation of students that have lost integrity, as they copy from their peers, and new programs such as AI will write their papers for them. Carolyn expressed this in her interview: "computers and technology have killed morale. I think it's taken away imagination and critical thinking skills because now we can just Google whatever and mindlessly copy things down." I believe this has also created a generation of students that feel isolated and have difficulty communicating with and in front of their peers because they are more comfortable behind a screen. These new concerns for teachers are complex and cause new stress levels as we conform to the latest standards and want to bring our students academically, emotionally, and socially where they need to be for success.

Research Question Responses

Research Question 1

The first research question asked how teachers perceive the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale.

Most educators had reasonably high morale before the pandemic started; on a scale from 1-10, the lowest rating was an 8, with the highest rating a 10. However, to some degree, the start

of COVID-19 negatively impacted all the teachers interviewed. The lowest score reported was a 3 after returning to the classroom. Teachers' morale fluctuated at various rates and degrees throughout the pandemic and teaching in a post-pandemic era. In the current post-pandemic era, the lowest score reported was a 5. Katherine explained that she scored it that low because she believes we aren't back to where we were with the students. In addition, their perception of teaching, in general, affected the degree of change.

One of the first factors that affected the magnitude of COVID-19 and educators' morale was their perception of the seriousness of COVID-19. The fear of the unknown, death, or the severity if they or a loved one caught COVID brought the educators' morale down. The next thing that caused moments of angst and lowered a teacher's morale was their level of knowledge when it came to the new technology platforms. The impact was slight, but it caused angst. Finally, the teachers all found a balance, with their morale scores maintained once they felt they had a handle on the technology. Unfortunately, morale began to dip again when teachers returned to school. A teacher's level of concern about catching COVID-19 and the demand to follow school and district mandates and protocols distressed and overwhelmed teachers.

Teaching in person caused varying degrees of stress on teachers. Teachers again were concerned with catching COVID-19 from their students and coworkers. In addition, they were concerned with ensuring they followed school, district, state, and national protocols, receiving different information from everywhere. Some teachers were also responsible for teaching in person, synchronous and asynchronous, when their job only required them to do one. This increased responsibility significantly lowered morale and caused some teachers to retire early or quit.

Teachers' relationships with their students, coworkers, parents and administrators were another factor that significantly impacted their morale. For some teachers, this increased their morale based on how they perceived these relationships. However, for other teachers, the impact COVID-19 had on these relationships still has lingering consequences today.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked what lingering consequences of COVID-19 continue to impact morale.

In a post-pandemic era, all the teachers interviewed discussed some lingering consequences of COVID-19 on their morale. Most of them rated that their morale has returned to pre-pandemic scales, but some of the effects of COVID-19 were more permanent, from quitting their jobs and loss of friends. Other lingering consequences that are still unknown are the short- and long-term effects they may have on educators' morale.

In the interviews, teachers discussed the more permanent consequences that still affect their morale. For example, some teachers quit their job and went into early retirement. In addition, some teachers addressed the loss of friends because of their different perceptions of COVID-19 and political beliefs. These are life-changing events that had a significant impact on their morale. Other consequences of COVID-19 that affected their morale are still unknown how long they will last.

Most of the new responsibilities with teaching during the pandemic still seem to be in place. This new trajectory in education is still impacting teachers as they adapt. Another significant impact on teacher morale is the regression in students academically, emotionally, and

socially, which is still seen in the classroom today. Academically, many students are behind where they should be. The impact of COVID-19, emotionally and socially, and the lingering effects are still seen in the classroom. Students and teachers were isolated during the pandemic during virtual learning, affecting students' social skills and interactions in school. Consequently, the emotional impact on their mental health is still prevalent.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings from teachers' experiences teaching pre-, during, and post-COVID-19 and how their perception affected their morale. In addition, each co-researcher offered a different perspective based on their location in the country, age, gender, and years of teaching experience. Finally, during the interview, the co-researchers reflected on their morale before, during, and after the researchers' questions. The data analysis revealed that the co-researchers' morale was affected and that there were still lingering consequences. This study illuminated the impact COVID-19 had on the teachers and the level of impact based on their perception. Moreover, the perception varied regarding their views on teaching in general.

Co-researchers were educators with diverse teaching experiences and positions that had varying and shared experiences. COVID-19 impacted educators in the classroom from all over the country with negative consequences. Through teacher's reflection during the interview, it revealed the negative impact. Teacher morale is up in this post-pandemic era, but we must understand the factors related to the effects to help teachers recover.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This chapter summarizes the findings that support both research questions relating to teacher morale, specifically teaching pre-, during, and post-the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusions of this study shed light on the experience shared among K-12 educators across the United States and how this experience affected their morale. The chapter also discusses the results, study implications, delimitations, limitations, and topics for future research. The results from this study can provide insight for students, educators, administrators, or counselors that would like to understand and help educators to recover.

Summary of Findings

This case study included eighteen educators from six different states who shared their experiences as educators working during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this affected their morale. The findings answered the two research questions centered on how teachers perceive the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale and what consequences continue to impact their morale.

The first research question explored how teachers perceived the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic on their morale. The co-researchers shared the challenges they faced teaching during the pandemic and how COVID-19 impacted their morale. As educators, finding their identity at work is essential and was a theme that emerged. As the co-researchers reflected and told their stories, their relationships with coworkers and administrators were key in

discussing how their morale changed. Another theme that emerged was the challenges of working with students. The co-researchers discussed how working with students during the pandemic affected their morale. Finally, another key theme that became apparent was how the virtual transition and the new educational trajectory had affected their morale. These findings captured the essence of this phenomenological study as they captured the educators' lived experiences.

The second research question examined the lingering consequences that continue to impact their morale. The previous themes: finding identity at work, challenges working with students, and the virtual transition, help answer the lingering consequences still affecting their morale. Though, the themes discussing a teacher's motivation to continue teaching in a post-pandemic era illuminate their responses that help to answer this question.

All the themes in this research highlighted their perception of the magnitude to which their morale was affected. Then, as they continued reflecting and telling their stories, they explained how these changes affected their morale. The COVID-19 pandemic was traumatic for educators, students, and people everywhere trying to recover. In addition, it caused a political divide in our nation and our schools across the country. Interviewing these educators provides some understanding of this phenomenon as we work to recover.

Discussion

Investigating the lived experience of educators pre-, during, and post-COVID-19 revealed supportive data that correlated with the real-world implications evident in the empirical and

theoretical literature reviewed. These implications align with two significant themes a) the importance of relationships to morale, b) acclimatization is essential for recovery.

The Importance of Relationships to Morale

It was apparent in the narratives that relationships are an essential part of teaching. The interviews highlighted how it represents a teacher's low or high point of their day, whether it was relationships with their colleagues, administrators, or students. Postured in the literature review of this study, this finding in the interviews had empirical support. For example, teachers' morale can be affected positively by the support they feel from their colleagues or negatively by disrupted relationships (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Teachers discussed the emotional demands of teaching during COVID-19 and the importance of their relationships to help stabilize morale.

Empirical finds that clarify how teacher relationships with their co-workers, impact teacher morale is limited and empirical support deepening our understanding of how teacher morale is affected by their coworkers during the pandemic is even more scarce. Teachers find strength in their professional relationships and testify to the value of these relationships as they transform into genuine friendships over time (Kim & Asbury, 2020). An example is when Ryan stated that she considers the staff she works with family. The data from this study offers an insight into the critical role of work relationships and the stability it provides for teacher morale, specific to teaching through the pandemic. Another example was when Katherine talked about the moral support her daily phone conversations with an older divorced colleague provided for both; she described them as "thick as thieves". The camaraderie of being part of a school's teaching community can be taken for granted until it is taken away. In the interview with John,

he explained how his relationships with coworkers suffered not being able to see them daily. The unfortunate experience of the pandemic cultivated reflection on the more profound sense of belonging that was missing during the school closures. The attributes of morale, such as persistence, fortitude, and contentment in teaching, are grounded in secure bonds with other educators and meaningful relationships forged through shared experiences. This study adds value to existing literature, illuminating relationships as a decisive contribution to maintaining morale (Perez-Chacon, Chacon, Borda-Mas, & Avargues-Navarro, 2021; Zhao, Li, & Huang, 2021; Fei-Shuang, 2021).

Relationships with the administration also emerged as a critical consideration regarding teacher morale during the pandemic. The co-researchers' stories illustrated the intentionality of school principals in supporting and guiding teachers during the crisis. In John's narrative, he discussed his principal and how he provided the most care during the transition into COVID-19 by motivating the teachers but not overwhelming them. Leslie explained that she felt supported by the administration through their communication and keeping the staff updated as they learned new things. Since the inception of this study, more and more empirical research has focused on the role of school principals during the pandemic, written from the principal or other administrative perspectives. Understanding the pandemic's impact and the administration's position from a teacher's perspective offers an alternative viewpoint (Thornton, 2021). When administrators took a proactive role in supporting teachers, it was a protective mechanism concerning morale. One co-researcher, Madison, credited her principal with helping her feel supported because he was readily available to answer questions and allowed teachers to make decisions about their jobs. Communication between administration and staff was a critical

component that made teachers feel supported; alternatively, administrators who didn't communicate well with their staff affected their morale.

Alternatively, teachers who did not receive support and care from their administrators quickly experienced burnout as they worked in isolation during the pandemic. The co-researchers consistently shared burnout experiences because administrators lacked clear lines of communication and were inconsistent with policies and guidance in managing teachers' roles and responsibilities during the transition to online learning. Teachers who experienced a lack of support changed schools, suffered silently, or quit. One of the co-researchers, Katherine, shared a situation where a new teacher in her school stopped working mid-term because she could not handle the pressure. Sara, a co-researcher in this study, is a new teacher and considered leaving due to a lack of administrative support leading to the tremendous stress of managing a new way of delivering instructions and connecting with students. Co-researcher Gabriela decided to change schools because of the lack of support she received from her administration. From my experience, I observed instances where seasoned and respected teachers quit mid-year the first year back because of burnout and not feeling supported by the administration. School principals have a vital role in maintaining their teacher's morale by either sustaining the emotional labor of teaching or undermining creating burnout. Administrators are crucial in keeping teachers invested in the school culture during times of crisis. Teachers quickly lost the determination to operate in such a drastically challenging environment when leadership lacked a consistent and supportive presence.

There is minimal empirical research on the teacher-student relationship and how the pandemic experience impacted teachers' morale. Before the pandemic, some literature illustrated the mutual disconnect between the teacher and student and its effects on the teacher's commitment to them (Youmans, 2020; Hawkins, Barbour, & Graham, 2012; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Moorhouse, 2020; Evans et al., 2020). This qualitative study specifically illuminates teachers' experiences during the pandemic and afterward. A resounding message was the challenge to motivate students to continue learning through virtual platforms and establish an effective reach when engaging them. Teachers felt consistently disconnected from their students. Co-researcher Taylor discussed how her morale plummeted because of the impersonal nature of teaching through digital platforms. Nancy described online instruction as lifeless. Other co-researchers, Madison and Michelle, shared the excruciating ritual of waiting for students to log in and then students never showing up online for class. It was a strange and surreal experience that yielded them helpless to connect with students they knew were falling through the cracks. Teachers have an intrinsic desire to see students grow and thrive, and being disenfranchised from their students caused them to grieve the passion for teaching they had before the pandemic. Because of the swift change in the delivery of instruction during the pandemic, there was very little time to prepare for such a massive transition. Teachers struggled to maintain and foster relationships with students and felt powerless to manage the new classroom setting. Teachers sat and watched students disengage and give up, drastically impacting their morale. More and more insight into this phenomenon appears in recent empirical studies adding to the growing reservoir of knowledge of the pandemic's detrimental impact on

learners. This study contributes a unique teachers' perspective and how student disengagement severed morale as they watched their learners become victims of circumstance.

Acclimatization is Essential for Recovery

Competence in using technology was a significant finding weaved through the co-researchers' stories. Very few studies focus on the technical and curriculum side of instruction and how that affected teacher morale during the pandemic. Some studies suggest that teachers' experience with technology at the onset of the pandemic affected their effectiveness and morale (Evans et al., 2020; Estrada-Munoz, Castillo, Vega-Munoz, & Boada-Grau, 2020; Youmans, 2020). The literature confirms the stories of the co-researchers. Older teachers, such as Laura, struggled with learning the new platforms and felt frustrated until they felt competent. Even younger teachers like Taylor discussed how her morale was depleted until she understood how to use the new curriculum. Empirical sources emphasize the importance of well-designed online platforms (Youmans, 2020). Teachers found flaws and challenges in using online platforms to teach. Co-researcher Carolyn discussed how this new way of teaching had killed her morale. She clarified that many teachers in her school are still impacted by the need to be proficient in using online instructional technology. Co-researchers shared that they are still learning to acclimate to this new education trajectory. Katherine and Carolyn used words like "cookie cutter and robotic," discussing how technology is changing the teacher's role and how this has negatively affected teachers leaving them feeling overwhelmed. Online teaching existed before the pandemic, but primary and secondary education still emphasizes teachers utilizing online technology. This

study sheds light on teachers' morale and how this permanent transition post-pandemic era impacts confidence and determination to continue teaching.

Implications

This study investigated the perceptions of K-12 teachers across the United States and their descriptions of their morale pre-, during, and post-COVID-19. The data indicated that teaching during COVID-19 did negatively impact teachers' morale. As a result, the findings of this study can benefit educational policymakers, administrators, and counselors in understanding the phenomenon of teacher morale during the pandemic. One recommendation is that crisis plans be in place for all school systems, including formal teacher training, online communities for teacher groups, and, most importantly, specific strategies that help teachers engage learners and create some method of control to reach at-risk students. A second recommendation is that administrators actively develop communication systems and empower teachers with policies and plans to move between teaching platforms confidently and fluidly to be better prepared for future crises. Also, clinicians can continue providing research-based counseling techniques to help teachers with their mental health and morale. This study has proved its originality since no previous studies focus on the teachers' perception of their morale during COVID-19.

Teacher Morale

COVID-19 changed the lives of teachers and the trajectory of education. It created fear, trauma, and anxiety for people as they transitioned back into teaching during the pandemic. Teachers' concerns for education and their role impacted their morale. There were strategies that teachers had within their control to manage the burden of teaching during the pandemic:

technology training, leaning on family, and supporting coworkers. The co-researchers discussed that the more they learned about the technology they used, the more confident they felt. Some districts provided technology training more than others, which was when family and support from coworkers became important. Educators leaned into family members who knew about technology, and those who didn't have family found support from their coworkers. Teachers also leaned on family for emotional support during that time. Many teachers mentioned children and spouses who provided the most support during the pandemic. Teachers that didn't have family support found support from their colleagues. Teachers helped each other with technology, lesson planning, or just being there to listen. Though teachers have shown that morale has increased in a post-pandemic era, they are still recovering from the aftereffects of the pandemic. Teachers have learned ways of coping to help improve their mental health. However, they are still struggling with teaching with technology and acclimating in this post-pandemic era. Finding ways for teachers to support each other and create a community of support during a crisis is critical. Creating online communities for teacher groups would be a strategy to support this need. The implication of this study is grounded on the teacher's ability to understand their perception of their morale from the pandemic and help teachers recover.

Delimitations and Limitations

Using purposeful delimitation strategies captured the targeted co-research pool. Classroom teachers from public and private K-12 schools nationwide were the intentional sampling population for this study, creating a boundary for recruitment. Also, another major delimitation was that co-researchers were actively teaching through the time of school closures due to the pandemic. However, I used no limits to the age, gender, geographical location, subject

instructed, or years of experience to recruit co-researchers. As does all research, this study has limitations. First, this study is cross-sectional in design and was only a small representation of teachers across the United States. This study is particular to the impact of the pandemic on teacher morale and is unique to this historical phenomenon. It does not tell the story of standard or traditional ways that non-pandemic circumstances impact teacher morale.

Recommendations for Future Research

One recommendation for further research is to create a quantitative questionnaire that could be distributed to large numbers of teachers within numerous states. Because many states approached instruction during the pandemic differently, it could be insightful to examine morale from state to state, considering the systematic approaches used to manage and retain the learning environments. This study included teachers from both public and private schools. A comparative study between these types of schools might illuminate different nuances to teacher morale based on school environments. The pandemic impacted teacher morale, students, parents, and administrators. Using other populations to study morale would be beneficial in creating a holistic understanding of the pandemic's impact on public and private education stakeholders. Lastly, a longitudinal study could continue to shed light on the lingering consequence of the pandemic and how school systems are thriving or failing to mend and restore the morale of educators and the school's ability to engage learners using multi-method approaches that allow for seamless adaptations in response to national emergencies and crisis. As a nation, are we learning from the COVID-19 pandemic's intrusion on education, or are our policies and procedures still problematic, making it extremely difficult for educators to adjust?

Summary

COVID-19 impacted teachers and their perception of their morale significantly. The onset of the pandemic saw school districts across the country apply different methods to deal with these changes. These changes required teachers to be flexible as they implemented online learning in various technology platforms. During this time, they have had to redefine themselves as educators. They realized the importance of a collaborative community and relationships with coworkers, administrators, and students. This study contributes to understanding how a teacher's morale is impacted, specifically by the pandemic. As teachers acclimate to teaching in a post-pandemic era, understanding how their morale is affected will help practitioners and educational professionals find ways to help them heal and recover.

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