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Transitions In Tumultuous Times: Teachers' Experiences With Distance Learning Amidst The COVID-19 Pandemic

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TRANSITIONS IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH DISTANCE LEARNING AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

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Lisa A. Ross-Hain
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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 prompted the first nationwide extended educational disruption, resulting in many challenges for teachers as they were forced to a distance teaching and learning model. Educators modified curricular content, delivery, and assessment methods to accommodate and engage learners and maintain academic expectations while at the same time attempting to mitigate undue stress for their students. Teachers met this task with little to no adaptive expertise to draw from, as few had previous experience with distance teaching. Constructivist theory guided this qualitative study exploring teachers' experiences in distance learning through a lens of adaptive expertise. A phenomenological approach was applied to data acquired through two rounds of interviews with teachers. The data was analyzed through an iterative process of coding, creating categories, and identifying emerging themes. The findings indicate that during the periods of distance learning, teachers modified their course content due to an imposed time constraint, delivery method, and desire not to overwhelm students. These modifications impacted academic rigor and continuity, as well as the assessment of student learning. Additionally, teachers' priorities changed from that of academic progress to that of student well-being. Other teacher takeaways include applications for their future practice in both the traditional and distance learning settings and reflections on how their experiences in distance learning during the spring of 2020 could impact their future as educational professionals.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning. Education. The classroom. Students. Teachers. Each of these words elicits a definition, experiences, visions, memories. Each carries a connotation that accompanies our understanding of them. Most of us have a notion of what it means to be a student, because we have been students. Although we are not all teachers, we have a sense of what that might entail, if only through observation. Traditionally, education in formal environments has been conducted in schools, within classrooms. Licensed teachers completed degrees with plans to be with students every day, teaching and learning. They trained to create presentations, lessons, activities, and assessments as integral to their curriculum with the assumption that they would be with their students, guiding them, interacting with them, building relationships, teaching and learning while, for the most part, physically together in the same space. This is the experience teachers prepared for and participated in until the major educational disruption imposed by the COVID-19 / Coronavirus.

Background

It was March 2020. High school teachers and students were looking forward to the end of the third academic quarter. They were looking forward to spring and outdoor sports, prom and promises of warmer weather, graduation and grand summer experiences. Then everything came to a screeching halt. Schools closed. College and professional sports playoffs were cancelled. Bars and restaurants statewide closed or moved to take-out only. All churches and places of

worship closed. Teenagers who traditionally spend their weekdays in noisy classrooms and crowded hallways were obligated to stay at home. “Social distancing” became the norm. The news fed the fear with statistics of the novel Coronavirus gradually infecting people across the country and globe, taxing health care facilities, and leaving every person wondering: What is happening? When will it end? Where will it hit next? How will we manage? Who will get it?

A culture of community gatherings, complete calendars, and constant commutes was mandated to stay home, maintain a distance of six feet, and make preparations for possibly becoming sick oneself. Everything changed in a flash. Slogans emerged with a clear message of “We’re in this together,” and all efforts began to combat the invisible enemy of COVID-19. The war was on.

Health care professionals, as soldiers on the front lines, learned their roles quickly and began rationing personal protective equipment as they administered tests for the virus and cared for patients requiring hospital admission. Grocery and big box store employees joined the battle to keep shelves stocked and increase cleaning and sanitization measures. They too were on the front lines as the public feared shortages of food and toilet paper. Educators played a supporting role back at base camp in efforts to maintain some degree of normalcy and engagement for students through distance learning. It is the response of this last group of professionals that is the focus of this study. The goal was to understand the experiences of high school teachers in transitioning courses from a traditional classroom setting to that of distance learning as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic.

While reeling in the spin of uncertainty and processing many drastic changes on a personal level, teachers in Minnesota and beyond were charged with the task of transitioning to distance learning in an effort to continue academic experiences for their students. This was a

scenario no one ever expected nor even imagined. This was something most teachers were not prepared nor trained to do.

Historically, schools in the United States have experienced closures due to weather events, violent acts or threats, construction, or other situations (Reich, et al., 2020; Wong, et al., 2014). In most instances, these disruptions did not require the continuation of teaching and learning as most were very short term, or planned, and the academic expectations were completed prior to or after the closure.

The spring of 2020 brought the first closure of schools nationwide (Reich et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis, in addition to the stresses placed upon every citizen due to the numerous adaptations to daily life it necessitated, additionally required adaptations in the teaching and learning format. As all 50 United States closed schools, each created guidelines which differed particularly in terms of focus. State departments of education, in their recommendations for distance learning, opted to encourage teachers to either focus on review and enrichment activities or on the presentation of new academic material to further academic progress (Reich et al., 2020). Additionally, all districts throughout the country were required to continue the distribution of meals for children of families who qualified, as well as organize childcare for emergency, health care, and other essential personnel in every community (*Summary of Child Care Provisions of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act or "CARES Act,"* 2020).

On Sunday March 15, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz signed Emergency Executive Order 20-02, authorizing the closure of all public and private schools in the state beginning March 18th (Walz, 2020). He allocated eight workdays for all districts, schools, and educators to plan for the transition to distance learning, which the Minnesota Department of Education defined as all students having "access to appropriate educational materials" ("Distance Learning

Template," 2020, para. 2). The guidelines published required every Minnesota school district to create a plan to address a variety of student needs including mental health and meals, in addition to continued academic programming.

With limited guidance from federal and state entities, the challenges to education were monumental. As all districts moved to some form of online, distance, or virtual learning, obstacles became very apparent. Disparities in access to and ability to use technology became evident (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). In many instances, an emphasis on the mental and physical health of students replaced that of academic progress. Educators across the country modified curriculum, delivery, and assessment in response to the pandemic (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Viner et al., 2020). They did so under the duress and immediacy of the crisis. They did so without prior experience or training.

Individuals become elementary and secondary teachers with the expectation that they will spend their days in schools regularly interacting face-to-face with learners. Teacher preparation programs guide future teachers to speak to groups of students, prepare partner and group activities, manage the dynamics and diversity of groups of learners, and assess students daily in their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being and growth. In-person student and teacher interaction has always been an essential and impactful element of the traditional educational setting. Classroom contact has been the norm. These are the aspects that have always defined teaching and learning. These are the aspects that compound and enhance the vitality of the educational setting, require adaptive expertise among educators, and create dynamic and ever-changing learning spaces. Although online learning is a viable and valuable educational option, students and teachers typically make the choice to engage in either a synchronous or asynchronous format rather than having it be forced upon them. In March 2020, teachers and

students across the United States as well as in many places in the world were very suddenly and immediately separated physically as part of mitigation efforts due to the invasion of the COVID-19 virus, about which even the most highly trained and experienced medical researchers knew very little and could predict even less.

With schools closed, students were confined, each to a different classroom. From teaching in one classroom, an educator was, in a sense, now teaching in 22, 28, 30 or more classrooms as students were at home, or their stepdad's home, or grandma's house, or somewhere, and those students were expected to continue learning via the internet. Although many high school teachers are accustomed to creating and posting resources and assignments online through a learning management system such as Schoology or Moodle, few are accustomed to reaching their students exclusively via the internet (Gewertz, 2020b; Gewin, 2020). None were fully prepared to teach from a screen in an empty and silent classroom or from a makeshift desk in their bedroom or at their kitchen table. Coronavirus changed everything.

Governor Walz mandated that in Minnesota, schooling continue as distance learning. Administrators met regularly with groups of teachers in efforts to support them in any and every way in the transition. Colleagues collaborated, conversed, commiserated, and ultimately created learning opportunities for their students in this new, amorphous, uncertain situation. Educators, understanding their mission as one which would provide a constant, a connectedness, and some type of normalcy for their students, accepted their orders and proceeded.

This study sought to understand the experiences of high school teachers in transitioning courses from a traditional classroom setting to that of distance learning as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 / Coronavirus. Through a lens of adaptive expertise, the study sought to explain how educators modified content, delivery, and assessment methods to engage

students and maintain academic expectations without overwhelming learners or adding undue stress in a crisis situation. It also sought any new understandings or knowledge these teacher acquired as a result.

Conceptual Framework

As a theory for teaching and learning, constructivism purports that individuals actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner (Elliott, 2018). This process is continual for educators who learn from each lesson taught; each interaction with students, parents, administrators, experts, and colleagues; each reflection on a class activity, assignment, or assessment. Ongoing construction of one's knowledge and skills as an educator form the basis of adaptive expertise – the ability to make efficient and effective decisions to aid learners in their academic progress.

Hatano and Inagaki (1984) posit that adaptive expertise differs from routine expertise in that it involves managing novel problems or situations by using relevant prior knowledge which, in turn, enhances one's knowledge in that arena. Adaptive expertise, as presented by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) involves both *efficiency* - the skill to carry out a task without having to spend great time and effort; and *innovation*, which refers to the ability or need to rethink and change what one does or how one does something. The COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 was a monumental disruption to education. It was a disruption which required teachers to transition to and carry out distance learning, with their adaptive expertise as their most valuable tool. Decisions were not founded in best practice as there was no best practice to rely on. Intuition was the best practice. The situation demanded efficiency due to the immediacy of the crisis and innovation as teachers had to educate in a virtual and unfamiliar manner. This study is an attempt to frame and analyze teachers' perceived experiences through

the lens of adaptive expertise: that is, the flexible application of both content and pedagogical knowledge in context of the drastic and forced change in education method and environment imposed by the pandemic.

From a constructivist perspective, an educator acquires knowledge of teaching and learning from every experience they have had as either a student or a teacher. Educators build adaptive expertise from these experiences which guides them in future decisions as they are presented. However, many teachers lacked the expertise to transition smoothly to distance learning as necesitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the majority of K-12 educators in this country have had little to no experience with distance learning and the technology required. Research on the instructional uses of technology indicates that, in general, educators lack the ability to integrate technology in their teaching and their attempts are meager in scope, variety, and depth (Fredricksen & Warrington, 2020). The move to distance learning in which technology was the sole means of content delivery, with very few exceptions, posed an immense challenge for educators.

Although all teachers have knowledge and skills with regards to the academic content, learning targets, or behaviors they strive to help students master, and a collection of approaches and strategies that have been successful in a traditional in-person setting, most do not have a vast collection of pedagogical knowledge and skills to apply to distance learning as the mode of instruction of content and behaviors (Daniel, 2020). The move to remote learning challenged teachers immensely as they were forced to re-examine content and assessment. Here again, adaptive expertise acquired previously was not enough to warrant a natural and completely intuitive response.

The theory of constructivism paired with that of adaptive expertise in the face of disruption frame this study. In seeking to understand teachers' experiences as they maneuvered into and through a distance learning model of education, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to guide the process. Phenomenology recognizes and values the unique experiences of individuals and offers the best approach to knowing and understanding teachers' direct experiences.

Need for Study

The demand for a complete and immediate conversion to distance learning for all levels of education across the country is unprecedented. This had never occurred prior to the spring of 2020. Research related to an educational disruption of this magnitude and impact is extremely limited. While related research is scarce, the opportunities to learn from this event are numerous. Understanding the experiences of educators as they modified curriculum in content, delivery, and assessment, along with their perceptions of the challenges and benefits of distance learning, can assist educational professionals, leaders, and researchers to reflect on teaching and learning in every realm. In addition, it can also equip them with a better grasp of the complexities involved in an immediate and total disruption of the educational platform. A better understanding of these experiences can inform and guide how teachers are trained and better prepared to manage future disruptions effectively.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences in making a dramatic shift in their presentation of information and interaction with students in order to be efficient and effective in the realm of distance learning. Finding out how teachers approached this task, perceived the challenges, recognized the benefits, and learned in the process of adapting to and

carrying out this new mode of eduation is valuable. Mandated distance teaching and learning during a global pandemic is a new phenomenon. Understanding the pedagogical decisions educators made to carry out distance learning during a pandemic crisis is valuable as it offers insights for teaching in any setting and additionally will aid teachers and administrators in adapting to and managing educational decisions if future educational disruptions occur.

Research Questions

The COVID-19 was a worldwide pandemic of immense magnitude and research is just beginning to emerge as to its impact on all facets of society. As pertains to education, the directions for research are plentiful. To consider teachers' experiences and reflections on them promotes valuable professional growth both individually and collectively (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993). Teachers thinking and analyzing their experiences with an intent to improve their practice makes them better teachers. Therefore, with a focus on high school teachers during school closures as a result of the Coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were teachers' experiences as they modified content, delivery, and assessment methods to engage students and maintain academic expectations in a mandated distance learning situation without overwhelming them or adding undue stress in the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020?
2. What did teachers report as the challenges to distance learning during the pandemic?
3. What did teachers report as the benefits of distance learning during this time?
4. What did teachers report learning in the process of transitioning to and carrying out distance learning during the spring of 2020?

Limitations

The nature of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers in transitioning their courses from a traditional classroom setting to that of distance learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular interest was their experiences in modifying content, delivery, and assessment in order to engage learners and maintain academic expectations without overwhelming them or adding undue stress. The study also sought to gather new knowledge or understandings these teachers acquired as takeaways from the experience.

The limitations of this study lie in the fact that the findings reflect the experiences of 10 high school teachers in one school in the Midwest region of the United States. The site was chosen as a result of proximity and ease of the researcher. The participants were chosen from among those willing and able to participate. Although these factors must be taken into account and considered with regards to generalizing the findings to all educators everywhere, the methods employed in data collection and analysis validate the findings and genuinely reflect the experiences of this group.

Delimitations

Although there are many directions for research pertaining to the educational disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, I intentionally chose to explore teachers' experiences during the novel situation of mandated distance learning. I approached the study from a constructionist perspective and the belief that educators gain and improve their teaching practice through experiences and are continually developing their adaptive expertise which they bring to new situations as they make decisions to guide student learning. I wanted to learn how secondary teachers negotiated distance learning when they had no previous experience in this area. As I

believe quality teaching requires a combination of intentional and intuitive decisions, I was curious as to how teachers responded to the uncharted territory of distance learning.

The specific findings of the study have limited generalizability, as the sample population came from a single high school in the Midwest and consisted of a small group of teachers from a variety of academic areas teaching students in grades nine through twelve. These limitations result from a desire to collect data through individual interviews and an intent to capture teachers' genuine experiences and perceptions. This is not a weakness of the study but exemplifies the inherent nature of qualitative research as seeking thick and rich description of authentic experiences.

Niaz (2007), explains Maxwell's notion of internal generalizability within qualitative research as generalizing within the community studied and not outward to external groups. The findings of this research project can be generalized to other teachers within the school that framed the context of the study. Outward generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research; however, applicability is. The findings of this study are applicable to the future of education and can be used to inform policy makers, school administrators, teachers and those developing teacher education programs as they plan and prepare for managing future educational disruptions.

Researcher Positionality

I am a teacher. I went through the abrupt and cataclysmic transition from teaching students face-to-face in a classroom, to attempting to educate via distance learning. My personal experience was consuming, frustrating, and extremely difficult. After more than 30 years in the classroom and many years of professional development and graduate study, I felt inept. My own teaching and learning experiences and the adaptive expertise I had acquired over those years that

were applicable and impactful with students in the classroom were in many ways useless in this new landscape. The partner activities, games, skits, projects, and learning activities that I had collected and used in all of my previous years of teaching were no longer possible, or perhaps they were – but I lacked the technical skills, creativity, and sometimes just plain energy and motivation to adapt them.

Distance teaching was complicated and mentally exhausting. Compounded by the personal processing of the pandemic and its impact on myself, my family, and my friends, I struggled in my professional role. I was not alone, however. My colleagues were struggling too. We managed. We survived. I have always said, "The only constant in life is change." Here I was, fully immersed in that mantra as no one had ever imagined. Another favorite adage of mine has always been, "Who is more adaptable than a teacher?" Somehow, I wanted to prove this. The COVID-19 pandemic provided me with an opportunity like no other. This research is not about me. It was driven by the awe of knowing teachers adapted, modified, and changed to accommodate the situation and continue to guide and support students.

Terminology

Adaptive expertise – the ability to apply knowledge from past experiences or training to address problems in a new context. The term is often used in relation to one's professional knowledge, skills and strategies.

Continuity – a consistent or uninterrupted connection. Within education, continuity refers to the intentional curricular design of presenting information in an order which makes natural and logical connections enabling the learner to build on previous knowledge to construct new knowledge and understandings.

COVID-19 / Coronavirus – COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus and transmitted primarily by contact with infectious respiratory droplets. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and include fever, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, and loss of smell, among others. COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March of 2020.

Distance learning – an educational format in which students and teachers do not meet together in the same physical space. Although distance learning may involve books, workbooks, and paper packets being distributed to students, more recently it has come to refer to the method in which all communication, information, and materials between the teacher and students are delivered and received electronically via the internet.

Educational applications (apps) – applications designed for use on a mobile device such as a cell phone, iPad or tablet for educational purposes. Some commonly used educational apps include: Notability, Explain Everything, Nearpod, Flipgrid, and PicCollage.

Educational best practice – a method or procedure deemed to produce high quality results based on research and experience and is set as a standard suitable for widespread adoption.

Face-to-face or traditional education model – an educational format in which students meet regularly in person with a teacher or teachers.

Learning management system (LMS) – a software application for the delivery, reporting, tracking, and documentation of educational courses or training programs.

Pedagogical – relating to the art and science of teaching.

Quarantine – a state of enforced isolation from other people.

Rigor – adhering to certain constraints with strict consistency and predefined parameters. Within education, the term is used widely to describe learning experiences and educational expectations that appropriately challenge students.

Schoology – a dynamic and flexible learning management system software that enables teachers to share educational materials and resources with students to access via the internet. Additionally, it allows students to submit their work back to teachers in a variety of formats via the internet.

Social distancing – the practice of remaining at a physical distance from other people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the recommended spacing was six feet.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I was an explanation of the global situation which prompted my study and the need to explore teachers' experiences in transitioning to and carrying out distance learning. As an introduction, the chapter highlighted an extended nationwide distance teaching and learning situation as an unprecedented event and one which educators were not prepared nor trained for, yet a challenge they met and navigated with limited external direction, instinctively drawing from their adaptive expertise while also learning new skills and attempting new techniques. Chapter I also introduced constructivism as the guiding theoretical framework for the study. Additionally, included were the purpose of the research, the questions which guided the project, as well as limitations, delimitations, and applicability of the study and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter II is a compilation of the professional literature that informed the study, including resources regarding past educational disruptions, the chronology of COVID-19, and challenges posed with the closure to schools and the transition to distance learning. Specifically,

I sought to review the literature as it pertained to teachers' experiences in situations of educational disruption.

Chapter III explains the methods employed in the study. It includes information regarding the qualitative phenomenological methods and procedures that I used to conduct the study. The context, selection of participants and the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection are included. This chapter also relates the rationale for the methodological decisions and explains the data analysis methods employed.

Chapter IV presents the findings of the research study. The findings are organized by main themes, which are further divided into sub-themes in an attempt to most accurately reflect the data gathered in this study. Much of the chapter consists of the narratives of the participants and excerpts from their interviews in order to support and highlight the identified themes as they exemplify the experiences of these teachers in transitioning to and carrying out distance learning during the spring of 2020.

Chapter V, the discussion, reflects on the findings to offer interpretations and implications. In addition, in this last chapter I present my conclusions with reference to the literature and recommendations for a variety of groups in light of the findings of this study. I offer several avenues for further study, and end with a final personal reflection.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to contextualize this study and its results, I considered the history of school closures and sought reported attempts to continue the schooling of children during the closures. I then looked more closely at the nationwide closures of educational facilities in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic and the many challenges discovered as schools transitioned to distance learning. Although only limited research exists regarding this very recent phenomenon, the studies and surveys that have been published begin to shed some light on the experiences of educators and helped situate my study. I also provide a review of the literature that helped scaffold my theoretical framework and conceptualize the research and methodological approaches.

History

Historically, school closure is not a unique phenomenon. Across the globe, schools have been shuttered for a variety of reasons including natural disasters, conflicts, weather, violence or the threat of violence, construction, refugee situations, and health crises (Baytiyeh, 2019; Tsai et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2014). In some of these instances, limited efforts were made to continue the education of children. Distance learning or remote learning via the resources available at a particular period in history is not a recent phenomenon. For example, during the second world war, educational materials were sent by mail or post to students in France. With the introduction of the television to many households in the 1950s, Turkey and several other countries

experimented with educating its young citizens via that medium (Reich et al., 2020). Research regarding education during these closures is extremely scarce. Some literature is available addressing the success of school closures in mitigating the spread of past respiratory viruses including the Asian influenza pandemic in the United Kingdom in 1957 (Vynnycky & Edmunds, 2008) and the novel H1N1 virus in Bangkok, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Australia in 2009 (Chieochansin et al., 2010; Effler et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2010). Yet, the research regarding the continuation of teaching and learning during these closures is nonexistent. Perhaps it can be understood that generally in the past when schools closed, the formal schooling of children was suspended. This was not the case in the spring of 2020. Schools closed with little notice and great uncertainty as to when children and teachers might return to their buildings. Formal schooling was not suspended. Teaching and learning was expected to continue. My study seeks to explore what this meant for teachers.

In the United States, schools in various locations have, at times, been closed for different reasons. Hurricanes, floods, and severe winter weather or extreme snowfall have made school closures necessary, typically for only a few days at a time resulting in limited educational disruption for students. Teacher strikes on the other hand have caused longer educational disruptions. Teacher walkouts in Los Angeles; Chicago; Ravenna, Ohio; and Homer, Illinois halted formal teaching and learning for periods ranging from 11 days to five months (Reilly, 2019). Occasionally districts have been forced to temporarily terminate classes due to violent acts. School shootings or threats of violence such as bomb threats have periodically forced schools to close for short periods of time. Building construction has also disrupted the school calendar in various districts, requiring that specific school buildings close for several days or weeks (Wong et al., 2014). Unlike other unexpected closures, construction or school remodeling

situations have been anticipated and planned for, with teachers and administration making genuine attempts to minimally impact students' academic progress.

Health crises, including dramatic outbreaks of influenza, have resulted in closing educational facilities in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, this country has experienced various strains of related viruses reaching pandemic proportions in 1918, 1957, 1968, and 2009 (*Past Pandemics | Pandemic Influenza (Flu) | CDC*, 2019). During the 1918 pandemic of H1N1, most U.S. schools were closed due both to efforts to curb the spread of the disease as well as a result of high rates of absenteeism. Three school districts, including two of the nation's largest, New York City and Chicago, remained open. School leaders in those communities during that very progressive period of the nation's history, believed that daily health inspections of children by medical professionals located within the school building were essential to catching symptoms early and mitigating the spread (Alexandra M. Stern et al., 2009; Alexandra Minna Stern et al., 2010). Little is reported as to the impact on education, teachers' experiences, or the academic progress of students during this 1918 pandemic, also known as the Spanish Flu.

During the spring and fall of 2009, waves of influenza A (H1N1) prompted more than 3,000 schools in the United States to suspend classes for various amounts of time. Studies exist relating to the impact of closures in 2009 on the spread of infection (Davis et al., 2015; Lessler et al., 2009). This same epidemic initiated studies which estimate the economic impact of school closings (Brown et al., 2011; Lempel et al., 2009). Additional studies sought to explain the processes of various communities in their decisions to close educational facilities (Navarro et al., 2016). There is no evidence of attempts to continue schooling for students affected by these closures, hence there is no literature addressing the experiences of students nor teachers during

these times of school closure. The nationwide school closures in 2020 were accompanied by attempts to continue educating the nation's children. My study sought to explore what that involved for teachers.

Closing schools for various reasons, in isolated sectors of the country for short periods of time, is rather routine. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, however, prompted the first nationwide closure of schools for three months or more and the full impact of this decision is yet to be fully realized. Although several studies exist which explore the result of school closures on the spread of infection during the 1918 as well as other pandemics (Cauchemez et al., 2009; Paterson et al., 2009; Alexandra M. Stern et al., 2009; Viner et al., 2020), there is no information available regarding the success of any attempts to continue educational experiences for children during these closures. This exposes a significant gap in the research and highlights the need for exploration of both teachers' and students' experiences with distance learning during a crisis situation.

The COVID-19 / Coronavirus Crisis

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 as a pandemic (*WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*, 2020). This announcement prompted school closures around the globe. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that by March 18, more than 100 countries had ordered institutions to cease in-person instruction due to the pandemic, resulting in nearly half of the world's total student population no longer attending classes in a building and seeing their teachers every day. Eventually, more than 87% of students globally were affected by school closures (*Education*, 2020). Although the United States federal government did not order nationwide closure, from February to May 2020, 48 states, four U.S.

territories, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense Education Activity mandated or required the closure of school buildings for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic school year ("The Coronavirus Spring," 2020).

On March 15, 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, in Emergency Executive Order 20-02, authorized the Commissioner of Education to close all public schools in the state beginning March 18. The order additionally recommended closure of other educational facilities, stressed the obligation to continue to support Minnesota families, and commissioned the Minnesota Departments of Education (MDE) and Health (MDH) to provide guidance for distance learning (Walz, 2020). The shift to distance learning in Minnesota began. Although the Governor's mandate allowed for two face-to-face days with students in classrooms before enacting the school closures, neither students nor teachers realized these would be their last days together for the 2019-2020 academic school year.

The Minnesota Department of Education provided school districts with a Distance Learning Template (see Appendix A), which required, "Students engaging in distance learning have access to appropriate educational materials and receive daily interaction with their licensed teacher(s)" and which "intended to support Minnesota school districts and charters in ensuring they have meaningful, relevant, and equitable learning plans in place to address the needs of all students" (School Closure Guidance for Public School Districts and Charter Schools, 2020, p. 3). Consisting of several questions and considerations for districts and school administrators to address in their scramble for a quality distance learning plan for students, the Minnesota Distance Learning Template addressed issues including access to educational materials, student mental health, communication with stakeholders, and meeting the needs of diverse and vulnerable students (Distance Learning Template, 2020).

According to one district level curriculum specialist, there was “very little” guidance from the state department of education and administrators were left to scour sources independently for relevant materials or information for teachers as they sought to assist them in their task of distance teaching. “It was quite disheartening to ask questions [of the state department of education] and not get concrete answers,” stated the curriculum specialist. “We received limited assistance in terms of how best to move to distance learning. I guess they were reeling just like we were” (S. Akre, personal communication August 11, 2020). In Minnesota, limited direction from state officials to district leaders resulted in limited direction for building administrators which led to significant reliance on individual teachers and their adaptive expertise, creativity, and innovation to develop tactics for continuing to offer academic experiences and meet the needs of their students. It was the goal of this study to explore this phenomenon and learn how teachers met the challenge of converting to online teaching in which the immediacy, lack of previous experience and training, and uniqueness of the emergency situation impacted all that they did or attempted to do.

Challenges to Education During COVID-19

The historic and unprecedented educational disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic instigated numerous challenges for administrators, students, families, and teachers. All were challenges that individuals in these groups were not prepared nor trained for.

Administrators faced the difficulties in supporting teachers who were experiencing loss, anxiety, uncertainty, and frustration. Recognizing the need to care for educators as paramount to their ability to care for students, some principals focused on reminding their teachers of the importance of self-care, establishing a daily routine, and the opportunity to be creative in their approach to distance teaching. Baird (2020) explained how district leaders and school principals

had little to no training in managing an educational setting amidst a pandemic, they turned to a focus on supporting teachers and allowing them flexibility in their approach. This research project, although not the focus, did find mention of the influence of principals' mandates and suggestions on the decisions of teachers during the time of distance learning.

Various articles recognized the concerns for students' well-being during prolonged school closure and home confinement (Dorn et al., 2020; Venet, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). These included lack of physical activity, longer screen time, and less favorable diets. Past research explored the additional psychological effects related to quarantine, including the stress imposed by the fear of infection, boredom, frustration, and lack of socialization with peers and teachers (Stern et al., 2009). Quarantined in their home environments, students were met with additional factors that potentially compromised their well-being. Lack of personal space and, for many, family financial loss, led to anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2020). Considering the psychological impact of quarantine on individuals, Brooks et al. (2020) reported feelings of grief, confusion, anger, and insomnia as common during extended periods of time separated from others. Students and teachers alike were quarantined in the spring of 2020.

The pandemic also exacerbated issues of poverty and food insecurities for many families. Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) and Walters (2020) cite schools as the primary source of healthy eating for many children. In addition, they point out that children from low-income households were at risk of little to no support for their learning at home due to lack of internet, parents less able or motivated to assist in the children's learning due to work, uncertainties in how to help them, caring for other children at home, or other.

Dorn et al. (2020) estimated the impact of school closures on learning loss and reported that the quality of a student's distance learning experience depended on the quality of remote

instruction, home support, and the amount of student engagement in learning. The study ultimately reported the likelihood of increasing an already-present achievement gap and the number of teens dropping out of high school as not being able to enter a building potentially cuts them off from the support offered by caring adults including counselors, social workers, and teachers. Although this study intended to focus on the experiences of teachers, their experiences naturally involved interactions with students. Whether via email, video conferencing, phone calls, or simply the exchange of information, instructions, and assignments or projects as part of an academic course, teachers were influenced by the perceived experiences of their students. For many participants in this study, their communications and interactions went beyond the boundaries of academics as they attempted to support the well-being and emotional stability of their students.

Ultimately, the primary challenges to education during the pandemic crisis, according to the limited literature available, were the psychological impacts and the inequities that were exacerbated by the situation. Several articles addressed the inequities for students in accessing education electronically and receiving the necessary support to progress academically (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020; Walters, 2020).

The educational disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic posed several challenges to the systems of education that had been in place for many years. The effects of this massive disruption are yet to be known, understood, or dealt with.

School Leaders' Responses

When the pandemic hit, all suddenly found themselves coping personally and professionally with the numerous, vast, and immediate changes. School leaders were no exception. As evidenced by Vu et al. (2020), the chaos which ensued as a result of the pandemic,

which shifted long-established learning and teaching habits, required school leaders to face critical unknown issues without time or tools to manage them.

School districts throughout the United States differed in their approaches upon surrendering to the COVID-19 pandemic and moving all education to that of distance learning. For example, daily curricular activities for elementary students in Arkansas included up to one and a half hours viewing educational programing on Public Broadcasting Service (Reich, 2020). Additionally, some schools opted to tap into the collection of massive open online courses (MOOCs) which enabled structured coursework via the internet (Grammes, 2020).

As many educational companies recognized the crisis prompted by the onset of forced off-site learning, they began to extend their online offerings and several removed the need for site or individual subscriptions to access their many educational materials (Maughan, 2020). Districts and teachers were able to tap into these "pre-made" lessons and activities that were already designed to be delivered and consumed completely online.

Ultimately, however, with district and school administrators lacking the adaptive expertise or resources to manage the new, though temporary, era of distance learning, they were left to offering limited guidance and focusing on supporting teachers emotionally (Baird, 2020) as they navigated this realm of uncharted territory. Teachers in many districts were essentially abandoned to their task of continuing to educate children.

Teachers' Responses and Reported Experiences

Some information regarding teachers' experiences during COVID-19 and distance learning began emerging as early as April 2020 with educators reporting lack of physical activity, exhaustion, panic, loss of students' cues that helped direct teaching decisions, and concern about students' well-being and the uncertainty that comes with not seeing them daily

(Fagell, 2020; Gewertz, 2020a). Additional personal effects involved stresses surrounding health of self and family, living habits, and financial status (Vu et al., 2020). Teachers experienced personal loss, change, and stress during the pandemic.

In addition to managing the personal impact and unforeseen changes the situation demanded such as having their own school-age children home, possible job loss by other family members, concerns about meeting personal and family needs in terms of food and safety, amongst others, teachers were confronted in their professional lives with the challenges of continuing educational activities for students who could no longer enter buildings and classrooms. Teachers could no longer rely to the same extent on their adaptive expertise, their collection of resources to practice in a manner they were familiar with and to which they were accustomed. Instead, educators were bombarded simultaneously with changes, had to make many new decisions, and manage a unique situation. Even veteran teachers with many techniques and strategies in their "teacher toolboxes" were discombobulated and disoriented in the new environment. All were confronted with a plethora of novel and complex challenges as they transitioned to distance learning.

Additional experiences shared by teachers in the literature included the difficulty in the dissemination of educational materials, especially to those lacking internet access, determining the content and pacing for continuing to educate students, possible limited familiarity with technology and the tools necessary to guide virtual instruction, assessing student progress and competency, and assuring the support of students and their families (Daniel, 2020; Eachempati & Ramnarayan, 2020).

The need to make significant changes to curriculum content and delivery were also identified as challenges for teachers in transitioning to distance learning. Teachers reported the

difficulty in paring down content to make it manageable and comprehensible to students without immediate and continual instructor support (Gewin, 2020). DeWitt (2020), in his Education Week blog, reported scanning social media posts to identify educators' most salient concerns with regards to the imposition of distance learning. He shared that teachers' primary concerns revolved around an uncertainty in navigating the technology in order to be effective in the new educational territory and a concern over students' lack of engagement (DeWitt, 2020). In an educational column, Fagell (2020) acknowledged the uncertainty of educators in how best to support students both academically and emotionally from afar. This research project attempted to learn of the experiences of teachers in relation to some of these same issues.

Although technology posed an obstacle for many teachers, Lieberman (2020), in an article in Education Week, recognized the potential benefits awarded by digital learning as it allowed for more opportunities for independent self-directed learning. He also noted the emphasis during the pandemic, on completion of coursework and projects rather than assessments demonstrating aptitude. Similarly, this research study sought to identify both the benefits and challenges of distance learning as perceived by the teacher participants.

Empirical research of educators' experiences and perceptions was just emerging at the time of this study. Kaden (2020), in the case study of a lead teacher in a small K-12 school in rural Alaska, reported of the participant's experiences as including increased workload, surprise at the complexity of online teaching, difficulty in selecting content to teach, and struggle to engage students and assess learning. One survey revealed that the majority of educators' workdays during distance learning involved responding to student and parent emails. The next largest amount of their time was spent creating materials for online learning. The same study reported concerns regarding a decline in the quality of student work as the period of distance

learning progressed as well as a notable gap in achievement and school engagement correlating to family income (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020).

At the time of this study, literature and research exploring teachers' experiences with distance teaching and learning models during the COVID-19 emergency situation was scarce. This made evident the need for delving into this phenomenon, speaking with educators who lived it, and sharing the findings. The purpose of this study was to do just that. The goal was to explore the experiences of teachers in making the transition to distance learning, particularly with regards to the modification of content, delivery, and assessment, while learning too, of the particular challenges and benefits teachers experienced and any other takeaways they noted from their lived experience.

The review of the literature exposes a gap in the research regarding teachers' experiences amidst educational disruptions. Additionally, the scarcity of empirical research as directly reflecting teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and forced transition to distance learning, supports the need for this research study which exists within a conceptual framework of constructivism and adaptive expertise.

Theoretical Foundation

Constructivist learning theory refers to the continual building of knowledge and skills as a result of experiences. Learning, for an educator, results from daily experiences and interactions in the school setting. Teachers continually construct their knowledge of teaching and learning and abilities as educators through their experiences as one. This process may be very intentional, or more intuitive. Yet, as Dewey (1938) points out, "No experience is educative that does not tend both to knowledge of more facts and entertaining of more ideas and to a better, a more orderly, arrangement of them" (p. 82). Bruner (1985) too emphasizes that the task of learning

and building knowledge requires some organizing of experiences. He purports that the dynamics of learning involve a preconceived, yet often unconscious set of rules about how the world operates. Hence, constructing learning involves an "unstable equilibrium between assimilating experience to the rules and accommodating the rules to experience" which then demand to be arranged and made available (p. 7). As applied to this study, constructivist theory supports the notion that teachers attempted to draw on the rules that had guided their practice prior to the disruption of the pandemic. Yet as the rules had changed so quickly and drastically, they were forced to accommodate and adapt to some new rules surrounding the novel experience of distance teaching and learning

The building of knowledge, skills, and abilities as a professional educator leads to decisional capital or adaptive expertise. Educators continually add to their "teacher toolbox" both consciously and intuitively as they carry out the daily activities and interactions with learners, thus acquiring knowledge and skills to apply in future teaching and learning situations. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), decisional capital is "capital that enables them [teachers] to make wise judgments in circumstances where there is no fixed rule or piece of incontrovertible evidence to guide them" (p. 94). This is exactly what the school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic created: circumstances where there was no fixed rule. Mandated distance teaching, for the majority of primary, intermediate, and secondary teachers in the United States was novel, unknown territory. In a sense, educators had nothing in their toolboxes to apply to this new mode of education. In another sense perhaps they had many things, but they were forced to find and apply them quickly – and only if they were compatible with the technology and online delivery modes they were required to use.

Decisional capital can be likened to the "adaptive expertise" discussed by Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005). Contrasted with experts who continue to develop greater efficiency in a core set of competencies, "adaptive experts are much more likely to change their core competencies and continually expand the breadth and depth of their expertise" (p. 49). This reflects the ability to analyze, reflect, adjust, and adapt – all essential for quality educators in a profession where change and diversity is constant and at times, drastic. Fredricksen and Warrington (2020) elaborate to explain that adaptive expertise "focuses on the uncertain and ambiguous situations educators face. Adaptive experts are those who use knowledge flexibly in new situation to change existing procedures or invent new ways to approach novel problems" (p. 2). It is accurate to say that the distance learning model imposed on teachers beginning in March 2020 was the most ambiguous situation any had ever faced. All they had to bring to the table, or in this case the computer or laptop, was their adaptive expertise.

Being a "professional" implies having the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out a task or perform a service in the most appropriate, adept, efficient and effective manner using both the rational and intuitive realms of the brain. These two parallel and permanent cerebral operating systems reflect one's ability to consider situations in both a conscious, deliberate, analytical manner, as well as unconsciously making associations and tacitly applying knowledge and past experiences to the present (Harteis & Gruber, 2008). Being a professional requires training and practice. A professional certificate or license assumes that the holder has been authentically and honestly assessed by some standard and has demonstrated the knowledge and skills deemed essential to acquire or renew the certificate or license. Obtaining the license, however, does not denote the end of learning, improving, honing skills, nor acquiring new knowledge and abilities. These continue into and throughout one's practice in the field. The

experiences and further learning which allows one to become more flexible, creative, innovative, effective and efficient lead to "adaptive expertise" (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). It is this expertise that enables professionals to be more effective and efficient, as well as more adaptive to novel and unique situations.

Professional educators, in the multifaceted, complex, dynamic and ever-undulating environment of teaching and learning, rely on their adaptive expertise to address the multitude of situations amongst their learners, the content, and the learning environment. This is often an unconscious process of making decisions. In any given hour in the traditional classroom an educator makes a variety of decisions, such as: whether to allow a student to go to the restroom, whether to allow student A to sit next to or work with student B, whether a concept needs more explaining to the entire class or just a smaller group, how a concept might be explained differently, where to set the iPad down, whether to allow a student to use their cell phone because their iPad is dead, etc. There are so many decisions. For a skilled teacher, most of these are made quickly and intuitively. From past experiences teachers have acquired adaptive expertise enabling them to make fairly simple decisions, such as "Yes, student x, you may use the restroom," as well as more complex internal decisions, like "Several students are struggling with this concept; I need to come up with more concrete examples."

This research study of teachers' experiences in distance learning applies constructivist theory and considers the notion of adaptive expertise as a lens through which to consider the participants' navigation and decision-making as related particularly to academic content, delivery and assessment. Additionally, as constructivist theory holds that all knowledge is constructed via experiences, interactions, and reflection, educators gained knowledge in their experiences during transitioning to and carry out distance learning in the spring of 2020.

The literature validates that educational disruptions have occurred in the past yet does not produce a great deal of information regarding teachers' experiences during those disruptions. Although information surrounding teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic exists, there is little empirical research in this area. Teachers served as essential personnel to continue educating children during this health crisis. With limited tactical training, yet equipped with adaptive expertise, teachers met the challenge. The focus of this research study was to consider and understand teachers' experiences from a constructivist perspective and the concept of adaptive expertise. Phenomenology provided the best methodological approach for collecting and analyzing data to understand those experiences.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study sought to understand the experiences of teachers as they made decisions regarding content, activities, and assessment when forced to transition to distance learning amidst the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic. As defined by Van Manen and Adams (2010), "The phenomenological attitude comprises a fascination with the uniqueness, the particularity of an experience or phenomenon" (p. 449). Not only was I intrigued by the uniqueness of the total educational disruption caused by the pandemic, but also of great interest were the unique and particular experiences of educators living and operating within that disruption. Phenomenology requires close examination and analysis of experiences in order to make sense of them (Crotty, 1998). Hermeneutic, or interpretive phenomenology as designed by Heideggar, places emphasis on the lived experiences of humans within their "lifeworld" and seeks the meanings embedded in daily occurrences (Reiners, 2012). With an ontological focus, this study sought to understand participants' experiences within the context of their previous understanding of teaching high school and within the context of their lives, which, in this scenario, is the context of life during a pandemic.

The terms *hermeneutic* and *phenomenology* as Kakkori (2010) points out are essentially contradictory. Phenomenology, according to Husserl, is the study of an experience in its universal and absolute essence (Neubauer et al., 2019). There is an assumption that one can reduce any human experience to an objective essence. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation

and considering experiences within their historical and relative meanings. Hermeneutic phenomenology then presupposes a natural tension between finding the essence of a thing, or experience, within its presentation in language and interpretation. Heideggar relies on *dasein* to bridge this gap to some degree, explaining the term as being able to question one's own being (Reiners, 2012).

Schleiermacher acknowledges this link between speaking and hearing and understanding. He identifies the dialectical interaction between whole and part, speaker and listener, in which each gives the other meaning. This is the hermeneutic circle through which we seek to understand the mental process or true meaning of the speaker (Kakkori, 2010). This philosophical approach values both the roles of the speaker (interviewee) and the listener (interviewer) in understanding phenomena.

Dilthey, uses the term *elrebnis* to refer to immediate lived experience which is intrinsically temporal and historical (Kakkori, 2010). Experience is an act of consciousness which can only be understood in its link between past and present. Gadamer, a student of Heideggar, coins the term *erfahrener* as hermeneutic experiences which broaden one's horizon and enable individuals to see something differently than they had in the past. In this dialectical experience, a person overcomes previous understanding with new information that results in a more comprehensive understanding. At the heart of hermeneutic experience, is the notion that nothing ever appears the same again. As so eloquently stated by Kakkori, "We see ordinary things ('ordinary things' in the former horizon, world view or paradigm) in a different light, and we also become able to conceive of totally new entities. Our 'world' undergoes a change, and we become changed as people along with it" (p. 25). How appropriate this view is in light of living

and working during a pandemic. My study sought to explore the changes teachers experienced in their worlds of teaching high school.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of high school teachers in transitioning courses from a traditional classroom setting to that of distance learning as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic. The crisis warranted immediate and severe modifications to education. Students were relegated to their homes as the place from which they were to continue learning. Educational professionals were rendered responsible for enabling and supporting continued learning for their students. This disruption to the process of education as most had previously defined, understood and participated in, was abrupt and novel, providing a unique opportunity to study how teachers navigated this new venture. The research questions for this study were designed to understand teachers' experiences in preparing for and carrying out distance learning. The research questions that guided the study are presented here:

1. What were teachers' experiences as they modified content, delivery, and assessment methods to engage students and maintain academic expectations in a mandated distance learning situation without overwhelming them or adding undue stress in the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020?
2. What did teachers report as the challenges to distance learning during the pandemic?
3. What did teachers report as the benefits of distance learning during this time?
4. What did teachers report learning in the process of transitioning to and carrying out distance learning during the spring of 2020?

Study Design

Hycner (1985) emphasizes Giorgi's stance that phenomenological methodology must arise from "being responsive to the phenomenon" (p. 280). As the phenomenon under scrutiny in this research project was the lived experiences of educators during a period of distance learning. This was a situation with which they had no direct previous experience, thus rendering their adaptive expertise insufficient to transitioning smoothly and comfortably to this new model. An attempt at exploring those experiences warranted talking to those individuals.

Context

The study was conducted in a Minnesota secondary school during the spring of 2020, after the governor mandated closure of all public schools in the state, as many other states had already done, and most others would eventually do. At the time of the study, the school reported an enrollment of 1246 students in grades 9 through 12. The school had a total of 75 full- and part-time teachers licensed in a variety of academic areas with a range of teaching experience from two to 38 years. There were three licensed school administrators and four counselors in the building at the time of the study which began in April 2020, amidst distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ended in June 2020, a few weeks after the formal end of the academic year.

Participants

As phenomenology aims to explore individuals' lived experiences, Roulston (2010) purports that the researcher must identify participants who are able to talk about their personal experience during the phenomena under review. For this reason, teachers who had experienced teaching in the distance setting and were willing and able to talk about it were sought for the purpose of this study.

Upon receiving International Review Board approval for this study from the University of North Dakota and approval from district and school administrators, an email invitation to participate was sent to all licensed teaching staff at the school (see Appendix B). Upon acquiring interest and a willingness to participate from 11 teachers, the researcher sought and received each of their consent via a formal written consent form (see Appendix C). Shortly into the study, one participant dropped due to a personal matter, leaving 10 active participants.

The research participants included 10 secondary teachers from a variety of academic content areas. Specifically, the participants consisted of two science teachers, two social studies teachers, two math teachers, one special education teacher, and three elective course teachers, one each from world languages, music, and technical education. Of these 10 individuals, three have taught ten years or less, two have been teaching from between 11 and 20 years, three have had 21 to 30 years of teaching experience, while two have been teaching for more than 30 years.

Interviews

According to Roulston (2010) interviews, "provide evidence for claims about what happens in our world" (p. 1). She continues to explain the constructionist approach to interviewing as a co-construction of data "generating situated accountings and possible ways of talking about research topics" (p. 60). Thus, interviewing was chosen as the methodology for this study in an effort to elicit evidence to answer the research questions, and through careful analysis of the words shared by participants in their descriptions of their experiences, garner the bigger themes that the evidence supports.

The use of semi-structured interviews was employed. This involved a series of open questions which I prepared (see Appendices D and E). This strategy allowed the interviewees broad parameters for responding in their own words while guided toward addressing the topics as

outlined in the research questions. The interview questions invited the participants to tell their stories (Roulston, 2010). Additionally, probes were used to solicit richer and more detailed descriptions of phenomena. Sorrell, Dinkins and Hansen (2016) adopt the notion of the interview as a dialogue eliciting a shared construction of meaning: "For a conversation or an interview to be a dialogue, the researcher must listen, respond, project an idea forward, listen, and continue this way in a reciprocal process" (p. 54). With the decisions made in composing the open-ended questions, and even more directly in the process of probing, the researcher becomes part of the interview, and provides evidence of the co-construction of meaning, which is inevitable from a constructivist perspective.

Interviewing study participants to better understand the pedagogical decisions they made to facilitate student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, directly aligns with the purpose of this study and was determined as the best means of gathering data. Although electronic surveys were considered and originally thought more appropriate due to the circumstances which required physical distancing, in genuinely considering the research questions it was determined that a survey would not elicit the data in the scope nor depth required to most adequately and accurately answer the research questions

Data Collection

Data for this research came from interviews with each of the 10 participants approximately eight weeks into distance learning. Follow-up interviews were conducted three weeks later which was approximately two weeks after the formal end of the academic school year. The interviews were conducted via video conferencing as preferred by the participants and required by the quarantine and distancing recommendations in the region and by the university's IRB at the time of the interview. The initial interviews were guided by a series of open questions

developed to solicit thick and rich descriptions from participants of their experiences transitioning to and implementing distance learning for students (see Appendix D). The duration of each of the initial interviews ranged from 65 to 104 minutes. Second interviews were between 37 and 60 minutes in length and included some of the same open questions and guiding statements as in the original interviews (see Appendix E), along with probing questions unique to each interviewee, for the purpose of eliciting more details and elaboration on statements from their first interviews. An example of this comes from the second interview with a social studies teacher. In the first interview, she had stated, "Having to put everything on Schoology dictated content to some degree, but the content I gave students also dictated delivery." Being intrigued by this statement as I reviewed the transcript from the first interview, I repeated this statement to her during our second meeting and asked her to elaborate on this and whether she could give an example. She went on to explain that although content had to be available to students electronically via Schoology as the learning platform, teachers had options within Schoology to post a word document, upload videos of themselves, screencast videos, audio recordings and links to external websites, to name a few. Conducting the second interviews with every participant allowed me to get clarification, examples or simply confirm the information acquired in the first round.

Every interview was audio recorded and transcribed. I also took notes during each interview and immediately afterwards, recording personal reactions, insights, connections, questions, and perceptions regarding gaps in response to the interviewees' comments. In addition, I noted any particularly unique or thought-provoking statements from the participant and highlighted comments made or experiences reported that aligned with or diverged greatly from other participants' experiences.

A constructivist approach to interviews indicates a co-construction of meaning (Roulston, 2010; Sorrell Dinkins & Hansen, 2016). Although the interviewees provided the bulk of the data, the researcher's comments, prompts, notes, reflections, and reactions as the interviewer must be considered in reviewing the data. These interview notes and research memos aided in the generation of meaning and, although not coded as data, did assist in the process of data analysis.

Data Analysis

A general inductive approach guided the analysis of the data. As explained by Thomas (2002), the purpose of this approach is to "allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data" (p. 2). Moustakas promotes the need for a systematic process for interpretation of interview transcripts. Hycner (1985) outlines a disciplined process in order to stay true to the phenomenon in interview data. Among his proposed steps are transcription, bracketing and phenomenological reduction, listening to the interview for a sense of the whole, delineating units of general meaning followed by units of meaning relevant to the research questions, clustering units of relevant meaning, and determining themes from the clusters of data. Each of these steps was employed in this study.

The analytical process began with listening to the audio recording of each interview for a sense of the whole, as recommended by Hycner. This holistic coding, as termed by Saldaña (2010) was a general "lumping," on my part, of ideas and information in order to grasp basic issues and possible themes. While listening, I took notes and got a general idea of the information in the data in order to embark upon the initial stages of analysis.

After simply listening to each interview and taking notes, I listened to each again while engaging in word-for-word transcription of both the initial and the follow-up interviews with each of the 10 participants. Keeping a separate journal during this process, I noted personal

reactions, interpretations, and meanings in an effort to "bracket-out" or set aside these items and immerse in phenomenological reduction. Reduction requires being open to seeing a phenomenon in and of itself, intentionally suspending interpretations and "entering into the world of the unique individual who was interviewed" (Hycner, 1985, p. 281). Reduction involves being truly attentive to the essence of a lived experience as embedded in the words of the interviewees. Merleau-Ponty's definition of phenomenological reduction is simply a sincere attempt to describe the basic experience of the world (van Manen & Adams, 2010).

According to Roulston (2010) the concept of the interview from a constructivist framework, involves showing "how meaning unfolds through in-depth, line-by-line analyses" (p. 62). Following the holistic coding process, I engaged in a process of coding requiring a more in-depth examination of the transcribed interviews which consisted of segmenting the exact words and phrases in the interviews and coding them with short words or phrases deemed most indicative of the meaning or description expressed.

Although my questions, comments, and prompts were included in the interview transcripts, they were not coded in this process as, according to Saldaña (2010), "the researcher's utterances are more functional than substantive [in some cases] and do not merit a code" (p. 17). These elements facilitated in the coding, organizing, and overall analysis. They served in the co-construction of meaning in the interviews. Yet, as the research goal was to understand the experiences of the participants, my lines in the interview transcripts were not coded. Similarly, my notes with initial reactions, confusions, connections, and perceptions were not coded nor considered part of the data to be analyzed.

The second round of data analysis aligned with Hycner's step of delineating units of general meaning and resulted in developing numerous codes, leaving me with a sense of chaos. I

then started the meticulous process of charting the primary data from the transcripts and assigning the raw data to identified codes. Returning to the core research questions and delineating units of meaning relevant to these questions as suggested by Hycner, patterns began to emerge. Reiterating the process of scanning the transcripts and intentionally testing the primary data against the assigned codes most pertinent to the research questions, some codes were reworded, others were added. After determining all relevant data was adequately represented in the chosen codes, the codes were organized into categories.

Hycner refers to the crucial steps of clustering units of relevant meaning and determining themes from those clusters (p. 290). Adams and Van Manen (2010) also refer to the importance of themes and explain the practice of thematization in exploring the qualitative dimensions of a phenomenon. Themes, they say, are the "fasteners or foci" that allow for describing experience (p. 450). From the raw interview transcription data, through a reiterative process of coding and categorizing, I then embarked on a more intuitive process in an attempt to create themes.

Although intuitive, I employed a structured method of thematization. Beginning by physically writing each of the categories that had been developed on a post-it note, I manipulated the notes on a large sheet of paper in an effort to begin to see the themes. Although a tedious and time-consuming activity, with multiple attempts at organization, this method aided greatly in identifying the prominent themes, their interrelationships, and a logical process for presenting them in the findings.

In subsequent readings of the interviews and continual review of the codes assigned, the categories developed, as did the emerging themes. A process of continually testing the raw data against the themes was employed. Eventually no new themes emerged, thus suggesting primary themes had been revealed. Once identified, specific excerpts were chosen from the interview

data which were deemed to best exemplify and provide evidence of the validity of each theme. In this manner, then, the findings arose inductively from the raw data contained in the interviews.

Validity and Trustworthiness

For this study, the interview questions were developed in an effort to get at the "lived experience" and essential elements of the participants in their experiences with distance learning. Research participants were solicited and chosen. Data collection, in the form of interviews began upon receiving written consent from participants. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In listening to the interviews multiple times and carefully coding the words and phrases the participants used, categories and themes were developed and specific excerpts from the interviews were chosen to best exemplify support for the final claims.

Acknowledging the responsibility of researchers to demonstrate the worthiness and validity of their project, Creswell & Miller identify several techniques qualitative researchers use for this purpose including thick and rich description, triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and audit trails (Carlson, 2010). Carlson (2010) points out the poignant necessity of these, as in qualitative research, data is collected using researcher-created instruments, including the researcher themself as a tool, and interpretive analysis. This differs from the quantitative researcher's approach and use of scientifically validated means and statistical computations.

In this study, data regarding a teacher's experiences was sought by preparing and bringing the same open questions to guide each interview, as well as employing the technique of probing to gain additional and more detailed information. Conducting follow-up interviews allowed for review of the initial conversations and intentionally deciding on questions for the second interview. Additionally, the series of interviews offered a means of tracking my interpretations and doing member checks. Although the list of follow-up questions closely

resembled those in the initial interview, the second conversation allowed the researcher to solicit information that was not addressed initially and seek more explanation on items from the first interview. In both interviews with each of the 10 participants, I conducted probing techniques with comments such as, “Tell me more about that,” or “What were your experiences with ___?” Additionally, I repeated phrases or sentences back to the interviewee to check for understanding and solicit clarification.

Denzin (as noted in Fusch et. al., 2018) explains the importance of data triangulation in qualitative research to increase objectivity, credibility and dependability. Attention to the three data points of people, space, and time to discover similarities in divergent settings enhances and validates the data and the findings. In this study, triangulation was achieved by interviewing multiple people regarding their experiences surrounding the same phenomena, conducting two interviews approximately two weeks apart with each participant, and analyzing the transcriptions of all of the interviews to discern points of convergence. Miles and Huberman highlight the importance of gathering data from a variety of sources, then comparing the data across these sources, as integral to qualitative research (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019). In this study I conducted multiple interviews over time and carefully dissected the words and phrases used by participants to determine convergence of data to themes, achieving triangulation.

Upon identifying the categories and primary themes that came out of the interview data, I shared these with each participant as a means of member checking. Roulston (2010) points to member checking, or member validation as valuable in providing evidence to support claims made in the findings and conclusion (p. 85). All 10 participants in the study agreed that their experiences aligned with the categories and themes as determined by the researcher. Several

noted that although one or two of the themes identified resonated more strongly with them individually, they agreed that their interview comments represented the other themes also.

In this study, the audit trail consisted of documentation and organization of data throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Items in the audit trail include audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts, the researcher's interview and transcription notes, a journal collection of "bracketed" thoughts and interpretations, as well as steps in the process of data analysis. Additionally, there are a variety of writings including drafts of various parts of this document, primitive charts, random lists, post-it notes, thought webs, and evidence of attempts to outline the presentation of the necessary parts of this project.

Fusch et al., (2018) refers to Denzin's validation of the relationship of researcher to research by arguing "that researchers bring their personal beliefs in addition to the social and political environment, which eliminates any possibility of conducting value-free research" (p. 19). As defined by Roulston (2010), reflexivity is a researcher's acknowledgement of their role in the production of knowledge. As the researcher, I admit to my role and involvement in this research and my influence in its design, data, analysis, and findings. My experience of more than 30 years as an educator in a traditional classroom setting makes me partial to that setting and very sensitive to the experiences of teachers as that setting was abruptly and totally removed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the mandated move to distance learning in the spring of 2020.

Throughout the project, I engaged in intentionally bracketing out my personal reactions and responses to the interview data itself and took care to prevent my personal bias from polluting the data. Crotty (1998) stresses the importance in qualitative research, of setting aside previous habits of thought and attending to "the things themselves" (p. 79). I engaged in

"bracketing" as another validity technique as I wrote reflective memos, which I kept separate from the interview transcripts, coding and themes. With these memos I acknowledged my personal reactions, connections and early interpretations while examining the phenomena of teachers' experiences, which was the focus of my study.

Although I made concerted efforts to carry out this project to fully represent the experiences of the participants while mitigating personal bias, I cannot deny that they exist. The research questions along with the interview questions and prompts reflect my personal interests and curiosities. The processes of data analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of findings, although not intentional, inevitably reflect my personal assumptions and positionality in carrying out this project.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of educators as they transitioned to and carried out distance learning. Analysis of the data revealed four themes; namely, *modification of content, changes in assessment, change in teacher's priorities with regards to students,* and *takeaways*. Change was a prominent and recurring theme.

The initial research questions were as follows:

1. What were teachers' experiences as they modified content, delivery, and assessment methods to engage students and maintain academic expectations in a mandated distance learning situation without overwhelming them or adding undue stress in the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020?
2. What did teachers report as the challenges to distance learning during the pandemic?
3. What did teachers report as the benefits of distance learning during this time?
4. What did teachers report learning in the process of transitioning to and carrying out distance learning during the spring of 2020?

The data from the interviews was analyzed using a process of thematic analysis facilitated by initial coding of the interview transcripts, identifying preliminary categories, second round coding, refining categories, and recognizing emerging themes. Main themes were identified through the iterative process of coding and categorizing, resulting in the most salient topics in participants' responses to the interview questions. These themes were discovered

inductively in a bottom-up manner as emerging from transcript data when analyzed in relation to the research questions. This resulted in the final distribution of themes deemed as most accurately reflecting the reported experiences of the research participants.

As a result of the analysis, the main themes of *modification of content, assessment* and *takeaways* aligned with the original research questions. The theme of *change in teachers' priorities* also evolved. Additionally, the data found to answer the questions regarding challenges and benefits emerged primarily within the context of the other themes, thus these are not addressed separately, but are included within the four main themes as identified in this section.

Modification of Content

In this section, I discuss the experiences of the participants as they made changes in the academic content they offered to students. Changes in content resulted from an administration-imposed time constraint, a desire not to overwhelm students, and the need to deliver content and receive student work either electronically or on paper. Participants indicated that the amount of material presented, the rigor of their courses, and the continuity of content they offered students during distance learning differed significantly in comparison to that which they would have offered in a face-to-face classroom setting.

20-Minute Time Constraint Impacted Content

According to interview data, transitioning to distance learning resulted in a decrease in the amount of academic content teachers presented to students. This was due primarily to the mandate by school and district administration for every teacher to require of students no more than approximately 20 minutes of work daily, per course. All ten participants made reference of the need to decrease the amount of material they traditionally presented to students due to this

time constraint. Additionally, several spoke of the experience of having to determine the most essential elements of their curriculum.

One social studies teacher indicated the difficulty she experienced in paring down curriculum and determining what was absolutely essential in her courses. She stated, “The 20 minutes really limits you in what you can put out there for students to consume and what you can ask kids to do with it. So, you really have to bring it down to the basics.” She had to ask herself, for example, “What of the Vietnam War is most important? What of the Civil Rights Movement is the most important? Obviously to a history teacher, to me, it’s all important.” This exemplifies the dilemma teachers faced in abiding by the 20-minute time limit. Inherent in the adaptive expertise teachers accumulate is a collection of both content specific information as well as materials and activities deemed appropriate to offer as opportunities to students to aid them in developing the knowledge, skills and understandings expected of them.

Another social studies teacher shared, “Typically, we read the book and then I put in content as we go through it. Because of time [20-minutes per day], I was not able to pull in the extra content.” Here again, the “extra content” refers to this teacher’s collection of materials that due to her expertise as an educator, she considers instrumental for student learning. The move to distance learning and the reduction in time a student was expected to spend on each academic subject daily, greatly challenged teachers’ best practices as they were forced to eliminate much of what with their adaptive expertise, they knew was valuable for their students.

A math teacher stated, “The content changed. We went to the bare minimum. Distance learning made us [teachers in the department] evaluate the pieces that were the most important.” The unfamiliar ground of this new educational model, for these teachers resulted in a sort of

internal conflict and for many, a remorse at the loss of content, activities and meaningful classroom interactions that they had experienced in the traditional classroom setting in the past.

One science teacher simply stated, “There were so many things we didn’t get to.” The imposed time constraint, during the period of distance learning for these teachers, resulted in reducing the amount of academic content they would have offered students in a traditional classroom setting. All participants admitted to the time constraint being a primary challenge of distance learning.

Some participants perceived this winnowing away of content as detrimental to students either in not meeting the state standards or in depriving them of important information and experiences. One math teacher, referring to herself and others in her department who taught the same course observed, “Our course content changed in the fact that we weren’t able to cover as much curriculum as we normally would face to face. They [students] are not getting all the standards that they normally would have.”

Another teacher, referring to the science content he teaches said, “I knew I wasn’t going to cover as much as I should have or wanted to, but I pushed as hard as I could in the 20 minutes for my IB (International Baccalaureate) kids.” He went on to explain how he took a different approach with general 9th grade science. “With my 9th graders it was more of a ‘play with this simulation’ or find something fun that is related to this concept online.” His reference to what he “should” cover in the IB course reflects his understanding of the knowledge and skills that IB students are expected to acquire in terms of content. These expectations are not his alone. They are instituted by the International Baccalaureate Program, governing high school programming around the globe. He continued, “I’m concerned in particular about my seniors. I think some [high] schools in the country continued full steam ahead during distance learning. We did not.

Does that set them [students] back to a point where their ability to be successful in the future is impacted?" This teacher recognized that the modification to course content was potentially detrimental for his students. Although not explicitly stated, his comments allude to an uncomfortable friction he felt between the rich content he wanted to offer students, as he had done in the past, and the severe limitations imposed by distance learning.

A biology teacher reflected on the modification of academic content and its impact on student learning: "I think when you're doing distance learning, it's pure memorization. I'm confident my students didn't get the best quality of understanding or application of the material as they might in my classroom." Instead of learning about how various systems in the human body work, or how different conditions manifest themselves in the body, she perceived that students did not acquire much beyond perhaps learning some terminology. She felt a similar unrest as the other teachers in that distance learning inhibited students from learning as much as possible in her course. She felt intensely restrained from what, with her adaptive expertise, she knew was possible for students. This teacher considered distance learning as preventing her from offering learning opportunities to her students.

In contrast, both a social studies teacher and a music teacher shared that although they were required to keep student work time expectations at about 20 minutes per day, they still wanted them to have the opportunities to learn as much as possible. They did this by offering enrichment or optional materials. They demonstrated the efficiency and innovation inherent in Darling-Hammond and Bransford's (2005) definition of adaptive expertise.

The social studies teacher explained, "I posted a lot of optional things to also check out. I feel like the content I teach second semester is of much more interest to kids, so I didn't want to

deprive them of learning more about these things just because we only had 20 minutes. So, I would post optional videos, an optional interview with a soldier, optional websites to visit."

Similarly, a music teacher explained, "Our department came up with the idea of enhancements. So, here's the main assignment for the week, but for those of you who get excited to go beyond or want to keep doing something with this because you're passionate about the subject . . . here are some things you can do." He went on to explain that he would add links to videos, articles, and websites students could explore on their own.

These educators fully recognized the detrimental effects of the 20-minute time constraint on student learning, academic progress, and potential. Drawing from their collections of content materials and resources they efficiently and innovatively still offered these to their students despite the time restraint. Although they did not formally present all the content they would have in the traditional face-to-face instruction setting, their adaptive expertise allowed them to adapt and offer the content in an alternative manner.

Educator's Desire Not to Overwhelm Students Impacted Content

Also impacting the academic content presented, was teachers' intent not to overwhelm students in what they perceived as an already stressful and confusing time for them. Participants' genuine concern for students was evident. Secondary teachers, through formal training and their acquired adaptive expertise in working in a high school setting, understand adolescent development including the emotional rollercoaster teenagers often experience, the importance of peers, and the precarious balance between their budding independence from adults and their insecurities and dependency on adults.

One participant shared openly, "I really struggled with knowing how much [content] was appropriate. In the first couple of weeks, I was asking regularly whether the assignments posted

were too much for them." This teacher relied on his adaptive expertise to choose what content and how much content to present. He continued, "I wanted to find out how overwhelmed the kids were so I would know where I could take it." This teacher wanted to engage and challenge students but didn't want to take them over the top of the rollercoaster. He went on to explain that he started out with fairly small, simple assignments and, "as they were comfortable maybe just notch up a little bit more." Ultimately, he did not "notch up" the content of the course. He taught elective courses and he began receiving feedback from students that the work and expectations in their core classes, made it difficult to keep up in his. As it was an elective course, they were honest in sharing with him that his courses were the ones they felt they had to "let go." As disappointing as this was for this educator, he understood and respected his students' decisions as he deemed it a healthy response with regards to their emotional well-being.

A world language teacher recognized immediately that the distance learning situation would allow the teenagers in her classes a great deal of flexibility that, in hovering between childhood and adulthood, they may not have the skills to manage. In an attempt to require some structure and hold them accountable she shared, "I sent a letter on our first day of distance learning with my expectations. I expected them to get on Schoology, the learning management system, and look at the assignments, to read what needed to be read, to watch the video clips . . . I expected them to try to be involved in some way every single day, even if they were unable to complete everything satisfactorily. I told them, 'I'm not going to overwhelm you, but I want your participation.'" In her experience as an educator, she knew that participation is paramount to learning, and without experience in a distance teaching and learning model, she made decisions as to how to solicit participation from her students. This demonstrates the delicate balance teachers experienced in their struggle to require student engagement and participation,

incorporate some degree of content rigor and accountability with the desire not to add undue stress and anxiety to students' lives.

One participant, when discussing how she decided on content and expectations in her classes, said she asked herself regularly in distance learning, "How can I teach in the most efficient way that is not overwhelming to students, but is actually more engaging and less overwhelming?" The teacher was intentionally sifting through her acquired knowledge and experiences, her adaptive expertise to find the content, presentation, and activities that would benefit, yet not overwhelm students.

Another participant shared, "I had what I called Feedback Fridays. I asked kids specifically how they were doing personally. Then how school was going. I wanted to find out how overwhelmed the kids were so I would know . . . so I would know where I could take it." This teacher was referring to that balance of keeping tabs on the emotional well-being of students and wanting to "take it" forward. Like his colleagues in this study, he wanted to guide and progress them ahead in their learning while being sensitive to the tenuous nature of mental health and stability.

The participants in this study understood the need to offer academic content without overwhelming students. This impacted their content decisions, as did the 20-minute time constraint. Additionally, the third factor, content delivery, was instrumental in shaping academic content teachers offered students during the period of distance learning in the spring of 2020 and the Coronavirus pandemic.

Required Delivery Methods Impacted Content

Interview participants all admitted that the academic content for their courses changed because the delivery method changed. Everything these educators presented to students had to be

delivered electronically. Likewise, student work could only be returned in digital, video, or audio format. Facilitating these transactions, was the fact that every student in the school building had been issued an iPad, and nearly all had internet access in their alternative learning space. Some participants acknowledged this as essential to distance learning. One stated, “This would have been impossible without the technology we have today.” Another participant admitted, “Students having iPads was great. I was able to post everything in Schoology where they could see it.”

Schoology is the learning management system that had been purchased by the school district several years ago. Within Schoology teachers can post documents, videos, slide presentations, internet links, assignments, and various assessments. Students can access these and through the same application submit back to their teachers any assignments in the form of documents, pictures, audio, or video files, and some assessments. Most teachers were already very familiar with this learning management system; but others needed to learn more about it to carry out and manage distance learning. All students in the school building were at least somewhat familiar with using Schoology to access and submit work prior to the shutdown.

The interview data revealed that while participants agreed that the technology available to both teachers and students was essential to doing distance learning, requiring that all materials be delivered and submitted electronically impacted the academic content in their courses. It was also evident from the interview data, however, that not only did technology and electronic delivery impact content, but teacher and student familiarity and ability to use the technology impacted content. In particular, teachers’ lack of adaptive expertise with regards to presenting content and receiving student work exclusively via the internet posed challenges for many.

One science teacher revealed that although the delivery method could no longer be face-to-face with students sitting in the desks in her classroom, she made an attempt to simulate that

experience. She explained, “I did a lot of video lectures. That was something I was comfortable doing. It wasn’t the same as being in my classroom though.” The course content and her students’ understanding of it was inhibited by both the need to share everything electronically as well as her lack of innovation in using tools other than video recording. Her adaptive expertise did not include a great deal of variety in this realm.

Another teacher who considered herself a “dinosaur” when it came to using technology shared, “I . . . with this situation in particular, I just wanted to make sure I was comfortable with what I was doing and didn’t want to try to learn something new on the fly that might not work.” She explained how she had been using Schoology and Notability, an iPad application that enables students to import a document, write or draw on it, then submit it back to the teacher. As both she and her students had been using these prior to the onset of COVID-19 and the move to distance learning, these were things she continued to use and that dictated most of the content presented and the work she expected students to do and return back to her. In drawing on her adaptive expertise, she was efficient in choosing to use applications both she and students already knew. She lacked the innovation however, another component of adaptive expertise, to experiment with other tools that may have enhanced content, student engagement, or learning.

Forcing delivery of and engagement with content to be exclusively via student iPads, was frustrating and disappointing to a social studies teacher. “So, normally in the classroom we do so much more, like simulations where they’re [students] up and moving around. We always do a fun one for the Berlin Airlift where they are kind of simulating that and they are literally throwing paper airplanes around the room and the airplanes have supplies written on them. So, it was such a bummer for me to have to just assign readings and questions.” This teacher genuinely

mourned the loss not only of what was familiar to her in presenting content in the past, but also of what her adaptive expertise told her was beneficial to students in their learning journey.

Electronic content delivery was very one-directional, according to one participant. Delivery was teacher-to-student. In acknowledging the feedback loop that occurs very organically in a traditional classroom setting, this teacher lamented, "The content got out there. Answer keys got out there, you know. I just felt like I was in this dense fog, not knowing really where it was going to or who was making any sense of it." This same teacher continued, "We [teachers] were lacking that natural feedback like when you get someone's frozen eyebrow after you present something. That is your trigger to say, 'Well, I've got to explain this maybe one more time, or ask some probing questions.' This was completely gone. . . The hardest part for me is that I felt like I was screaming into the void and not having any clue, you know, how what I was doing was landing on students." Educators naturally attend to the non-verbal cues and feedback from students who are in-person in their classrooms, whether that be subtle physical reactions or verbal questions. Electronic delivery of materials completely eliminated this valuable element.

Another teacher elaborated on this and the notion that her content is often dictated by the students as they question, comment or struggle with understanding in her classroom during the presentation of new information. She addressed this loss: "In my classroom, when I teach, you know, the lectures aren't really lecture. They are discussions. We are back and forth all the time. We are back and forth all the time and our conversations will veer." She summed up this inability to involve students in guiding content by saying, "Normally I adjust the content to make it more relevant to kids. To find out what they want to know, are curious about, and take it there. How do I do that when they're at home, by themselves, without me?" Accustomed to and adept

at involving her students in guiding course content, without the live and in-person delivery method and interactions allowed in the traditional classroom setting, she explained how she had to simply deliver content that she thought would be most relevant and interesting to her students.

The world language teacher explained how she really wanted students to be learning language, not technology, and that this dictated some of her content. “I began my planning to choose things that we had done in class that continued with what they already knew technology-wise.” She also shared that she intentionally tried to maintain the weekly routine they had in the classroom in terms of using language apps on the iPad, watching videos and listening to songs in the language, and reading authentic text. “It [daily activities] was very predictable and I wanted to stick with that, and I did.” She went on to share that even though she maintained this routine, the amount of content was much less. “It was just a lot less information than they would have gotten [in the classroom]. The amount changed and the depth.” This is evidence that the parameters of the iPad as the only means of content delivery impacted the content that students would have received in her classroom from her directly. She explained, too, that students did not get the speaking practice that they would have in class. “We couldn’t speak the language. I mean, they made videos or an audio recording. I responded to those, so we had that interaction, but it wasn’t live. They did a lot more writing.” For this teacher, both academic content, as in what was presented, and student work, or what they did with the content, had to be modified as a result of distance learning and the limitations posed by technology as the means of delivery and student submissions.

One math teacher shared that she had to experiment with content delivery and student submission expectations: “The first week I laid out the whole week at the beginning of the week and had it all due Friday and I said, ‘Work though it at your own pace.’” She tells how when

assessing student work after Friday's deadline, she noticed repeated errors. This prompted her to change delivery and due dates: "I started releasing stuff for two days at a time. That way I was able to give feedback before they attempted the next assignment."

Four of the ten research participants experimented with video conferencing with students via Zoom or Google Meet. These four all described their use as limited and consisting of online office hours, or a designated time period when students were told that they could "come in" or join the meeting to get help on assignments. Two of these four mentioned meeting a few times with individual students over one of these two platforms.

The remaining six participants indicated that they either were not comfortable with the use of video conferencing or had received messages from the building principals cautioning against the use of live video with groups of students due to issues of confidentiality and the possibility of people on the student's end seeing other students in the class. After one attempt with a group Zoom meeting, one teacher stated, "I did not feel properly trained on video teaching. Could I require them to turn on cameras, sit up straight, unmute themselves?" She continued, "I don't feel the students were prepared to be in a video classroom, nor were the teachers prepared to teach in a video classroom." Although she shared that she thought the video conferencing had "lots of great potential," her lack of adaptive expertise in this are area and uncertainty with the live video option that technology allowed, inhibited this particular teacher from pursuing it as an avenue for delivering content and responding to students' questions.

A special education teacher shared her initial interest and excitement to interact regularly with her students using the Zoom platform, but that her department members were explicitly told that they could not video conference with groups of students, as the district was not completely sure of the legalities of doing so. She explained, "So at first, I was kind of excited. I thought with

my small group of math kids we would do a Google Meet and anyone could come on … But I couldn't do it. In SpEd we were not able to do that. If Johnny was at home and Crystal was at home and if a parent is on in their room and they see someone else in the class, then they know that they are all in special ed. Because of the confidentiality requirement in SpEd, we could not have students on together." This situation exemplifies that although the technology existed to enable real-time face-to-face video interactions as delivery method, all content and interaction had to be done individually due to concerns of confidentiality. Thus, supporting how the change in delivery options resulted in a change in content to be individual, not within a group setting.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in academic content due to the electronic delivery and submission format came in courses that normally involve hands-on skills, lab experiences, and performance, such as in the tech or trades courses, sciences, and music classes. Much of the content in these types of courses normally requires physically doing something such as welding two pieces of metal together, dissecting a frog, or singing a song with a large group. Teachers identified the move to electronic interface as severely impacting academic content.

The biology teacher, referring to how normally the content in her course involves students "doing" science in lab situations, said, "They didn't get their bone labs and their slide labs. They didn't get any of that." She went on with these details, "I know for like the blood typing unit, usually the kids do the blood typing. It is huge to have them understand how to type blood and what does it look like if you are an 'A' positive or a 'B' negative. You can't do that in distance learning, so you videotape yourself doing the lab and showing them the results . . . and it's a pathetic replacement for the real thing. Kids need to experience the real thing." The lack of laboratory opportunities such as these were a result of the electronic delivery method imposed on all educators. Content was modified to meet the limitations of the required mode of delivery.

A choir teacher explained the transformation forced upon his courses due to the move to distance learning. The content went from a focus on the dynamics and skills for singing with a group to attempts at working with students individually in their skills. He explained, “In choir, you’re dealing with matching vowel shape, matching pitch, matching tone quality, matching balance within sections and the balance within the choir. That is impossible to teach on an individual basis electronically.” He continued, “All you can do is you can focus on the students more as individuals and them progressing as an individual singer.” In efforts to do so, he explained in detail, how he had each choir member audio record their part of a song they had begun to work on prior to the closure of school. In doing this, he discovered how much trouble they were having with singing their part correctly. As result, he went through the audio files, found the best examples, and posted them in folders within Schoology for all choir members to access and use to practice. This was an enormous change in delivery of content from focusing on the creation of sound by the entire choir, to a focus on the creation of sound and singing of each student as an individual vocalist.

One research participant, a technical education teacher, was very candid about the challenges of offering all content and assignments electronically. He said, “I can’t teach what I want to teach in terms of the skill because I can’t assign students to go weld something, or go mill something. We can’t teach them the hard skills, but we can teach the soft skills and the exploration.” Although this instructor was forced to modify his course content significantly, he expressed it as a very positive thing for students. Without students physically in the building with him to do the hands-on work they would typically do in his courses, he opted to offer them more career explorations opportunities. He explained, “In a lab class, like mine, they are usually spending a lot of time doing lab stuff and you don’t bring in a lot of extra things because they’re

developing a skill, a hands-on skill. Now I could bring in some of those extra things. It was kind of nice." He considered this a definite benefit of distance learning.

He went on to tell about an assignment he posted for students to learn about foundry work. "I had them watch a video about foundry work. They read short articles, then actually went on a virtual tour of a foundry. There's also a little animated video showing exactly how to drop forge something." This participant shared that other educators in the department were doing similar things and having students explore careers in welding, automotives, and carpentry. Students' tasks included researching job outlook, wage potential and necessary training. He concluded, "This is something I've always felt should be part of the high school experience for our students. Distance learning gave us a chance to do it." From this participant's perspective, the change in his course content necessitated by electronic delivery was a positive experience for students.

One social studies teacher had students in her classes who did not have internet access at home which dictated that the delivery of all course content was on paper. She made paper packets which were delivered to students' homes weekly by district buses and support staff. She explained how she felt those students received less content than their peers with iPads and internet. "We [department members] rely a lot on technology to bring in external resources and kids without internet didn't get those. It didn't seem equitable either if you were going to make a video lesson or have them watch a video link or go to a website. It's not the same if you're just sending home paper copies, even if it is the same basic content." When asked how these students returned work back to her, she indicated that their parents took pictures on their phones and sent them in, resulting in no feedback from her back to the student on their work. The requirement that all content be digitally accessible for students allowed those with internet connection to

receive and consume the content and receive instructor feedback. Although very few, those without internet were limited to content in print only.

Impact of Modification of Content on Rigor and Continuity

Ultimately the imposed time constraint and desire not to overwhelm students impacted the rigor and continuity of academic content teachers presented. All participants reported how their content became simpler or diluted due to the 20-minute guideline and their intent to keep things manageable for students. In addition, the simplification of the content negatively affected the continuity teachers strive for in their presentation of academic content.

Content Rigor

Six of the ten participants mentioned comments heard repeatedly from a building principal regarding no rigor and a need to focus on student engagement, participation, and mental health. This aligned principals with teachers in the desire not to overly tax or stress their student population. This led educators to choose course content with minimal rigor for students. As one participant stated, “It [coursework] was more about just having an avenue to touch base and to kind of see how things were going for students.” Another openly commented, “It was more about them [students] making contact [with me, the teacher] than it was about the rigor of the assignment.”

For many teachers, student engagement and students working with something related to a course was all they expected. This prompted them to decrease the rigor and offer content that was nothing more than review or exploration or fun. Engagement, or students simply “doing something,” became more important than presenting new material or moving them ahead in their learning. With regards to choosing activities for her students, the special education teacher admitted to deciding, “OK, let’s just do some math.” The choir director decided to, “just keep

them singing." Both a science teacher and the tech ed teacher decided to offer activities they considered more exploratory, fun, or engaging, than offering their normal academic content with a focus on knowledge and skills.

One participant was very animated in our interview as she addressed the concept of content rigor and amount in terms of equity, which was an item stressed in the Minnesota Department of Education Guidelines for Distance Learning. "By equity, we had to give everybody almost nothing [in terms of content]. Everybody got almost nothing because we had to get them all the same amount." She went on to lament, "The bar was low because you don't want to leave anybody behind, but in doing that I think we left everybody behind." This perspective highlighted that the challenges presented in the distance education situation negatively impacted academic content and student learning.

Continuity of Content

Just as the academic rigor and expectations in many courses were lost due to the move to distance learning and the time restriction, concern for students, and electronic delivery, so too was the continuity of contact severely impacted. Several educators spoke of how the content they made available for students daily was not connected to that of the previous day and generally speaking, they offered "stand-alone" activities or assignments. They confided that this was very different than the connected content they traditionally offer in which concepts and skills are built upon day to day, task by task.

One science teacher revealed, "I think we lost a continuity factor a little bit in distance learning. I had things set up so they [students] could do any assignment in any order and it didn't build." When asked why he choose to present content in this manner he explained, "I didn't want students who missed a day or two or week of assignments to fall behind, be overwhelmed and

just give up." His concern for student's emotional well-being drove his decisions regarding the continuity of content. In his course, as with those of other participants, continuity was sacrificed.

His colleague did the same. "My content was like . . . everything was stand-alone. If they missed a day or a week, which some of them did, they didn't miss any content that would keep them from still doing fine on the next day's or week's work. This is not how we usually do things in class. Each day builds on the one before." Another educator explained, "Every day was a new topic. I'd try to bring in some of those old things, but it wasn't as easy as in the classroom when I could remind them quickly of the day before and make a connection."

Distance learning affected the rigor and continuity of course content. In efforts to give students no more than 20 minutes worth of course work per day, not add stress or anxiety, and deliver via the technology available, teachers compromised the rigor and sequencing of concepts and information that normally accompanies the content within their curriculum.

Modifications in Assessment of Student Learning

With regards to assessing student mastery of knowledge, understandings, and skills, project participants spoke of the challenges posed by distance learning. Teachers' experiences involved either making modifications to their assessment methods or assessing participation in lieu of assessing student course work.

Modifications in Assessment Methods

One educator, when asked about assessing student work for the purpose of assigning a grade admitted, "I did more of a submission grade. Do it. Turn it in. You get the points." Another teacher explained her process, "So, the assessment was much more lenient than it would be in a regular classroom, I'd say. If they put forth the effort and tried to do it, you know, they weren't penalized because of poor quality." She elaborated that this was very different from her usual

assessment procedures in which, as she perceived them, were valid and truly measured student learning. Adaptive expertise enables teachers to assess students' competencies with regards to their knowledge, skills, and understandings. Ideally teachers employ valid and quality assessment tools for the purpose of giving feedback to students as well as assigning letter grades at the end of a determined time period such as a nine-week quarter or 12-week trimester. When teachers were forced quickly into a distance learning format, many could not assess students as they were planning to do and had done in past years. Their lack of training and adaptive expertise in assessment techniques exclusively via the internet along with a lack of time to research or experiment with alternative assessment methods resulted in significant challenges for them in assessing student learning and progress.

One math teacher shared the following:

> The assessment piece was the hardest part for me. I started with a quiz every Friday for the first couple of weeks. Then I moved away from that. I found a lot more of my assessment in their assignments and I switched. I would have them watch a video explanation of all of the problems and then make corrections on their assignments in order that they would see the correct way of working problems, then do it correctly on the next assignment.

She employed her adaptive expertise to be efficient, innovative and stated this method was a benefit to distance learning. Her experience was that she felt she could spend more time with an individual student's work and address issues unique to each student better than she was able to do in the traditional classroom setting.

One teacher had plans to do an assessment with students after reading a book and having additional lessons in the process. Those plans changed, however. "I thought, 'OK, we'll be able

to get through this amount of stuff.' Then I realized we'd have to cut back. Then the next week realizing we can't really get to assessments. Like, it just kind of dwindled down from there." Ultimately this teacher gave up on assessing student learning. The unfamiliar territory of distance learning, the uncertainty in how to assess students, perhaps along with the stress she experienced personally during the pandemic, led her to not attempt it at all.

One of the social studies teachers stated, "I didn't do a summative testing. I think too, that the assessment during this time was not typical. It didn't measure genuine knowledge and skills like it might in the classroom." Understanding the core of assessment and its essential role in education, this teacher acknowledged that the abrupt and drastic change in how teaching and learning was being carried out, resulted in an abrupt and drastic change in assessment.

Intentions to do quizzes as assessment of student's comprehension, changed for one social studies teacher during distance learning. She explained, "I had weekly quizzes set up in Schoology. They were just multiple choice. Then I choose not to do them because I felt that some kids would do them, some kids would screenshot their answers and send them to other kids. I felt like it was too, kind of, uncontrolled. I really was worried about the cheating and that's the main reason I didn't do it." Recognizing that these quizzes via the iPad may not result in an accurate assessment of her students' learning, she decided to omit them. She went on to tell that the "points" students earned during their time in distance learning in her class were all based on turning in small daily responses or activities. "These didn't really assess their learning either," she stated candidly. Her tone and attitude when telling about her assessment practices during the spring of 2020, communicated a sincere disappointment in herself. I sensed she was embarrassed to admit that what she termed or scored in the gradebook as assessments, did not reflect what she considered authentic assessment. During the distance learning period this teacher experienced, as

did other participants in the study, a vast disconnect between their pedagogical philosophies and knowledge of educational best practices and their decisions and actions during this time of crisis. Although the adaptive expertise of each of the participants in the study was vast, each was lacking the expertise to navigate the waters of distance learning in a manner consistent with their philosophies, past practices, and what they deemed best for student learning and assessment.

Assessing Participation in Lieu of Student work

Another participant's comments regarding assessment included. "As time went on the evaluation became a little bit more of…not so much how you did on the assignment, but did you actually do it? Did you turn it in? Are you putting effort into it?"

One research participant, the language teacher, told of her experience. "Well, I looked at every single thing that came in. If they did it, they got their points. It did not have to be 100% correct to get 100% of the points. Yeah, that's how I assessed them. It was participation, and also understanding." When asked to elaborate on assessing understanding, she explained that she did this based on the questions students asked. She would direct students to watch a video with dialogue in the target language and write a short summary of their understanding, contacting her with questions in the process. "When somebody asks a good question, I can really tell if they are understanding or not. When asked to clarify whether she was assessing their understanding of the video based on their summary of it or the questions that they asked her about it, she quickly responded, "The questions they ask me are much more telling." She modified her assessment methods as a result of distance learning.

The math department modified their assessment methods during distance learning. One teacher explained, "We did a quiz on Fridays on the content that we worked on during that week. We did not do the traditional big, you know, unit tests like we would if we were in class." She

went on to tell more about these quizzes. “We used Schoology as you can build a quiz or test right in there. Normally we would never have done a multiple choice math assessment. There are other options that we’ve [department members] thrown around, but this is the one that we agreed on that would be the best for the students.”

Another participant reflected on formative assessment.

> The other thing that has changed a lot with distance learning, is formative assessment is very difficult.Think of the million ways you do formative assessment in your classroom. You do it a million times a day. Not just for where any one kid is, but where your class is as a whole and how much reteaching you need to do.

She went on to admit not knowing how to replace this while in distance learning. Relating back to the earlier notion of student responses, input, and questions guiding content, the typical formative assessment that is continual for a teacher in a classroom of students was lacking.

In summary, the adaptive expertise to assess in a remote teaching and learning situation was lacking. Quality assessment was a significant challenge for teachers. All of the study participants made changes to their assessment practices. Another noteworthy change amongst these teachers which was evident from the interview data, was their change in priority from that of students acquiring knowledge, understandings, and skills to a focus on their students’ well-being.

Changes in Teachers’ Priorities With Regards to Students

Another prominent theme that surfaced in analysis of the interview data, was the change in educators’ priorities with regards to their students. Most of these teachers reported experiences in which their priorities transformed from guiding students forward in their academic progress, to

that of supporting them emotionally. They served not only as teachers, but in some ways, they also became counselors. All reported some element of change in their focus from being primarily concerned with the learning of their students to that of their students' mental health needs and emotional well-being. Although I have reported how the concern for student's emotional well-being impacted curricular and content decisions for these educators, in this section I will report how student well-being became the priority for several participants and how that guided their communication and attempts to build or maintain relationships with them.

One teacher summed up her experiences with this, "No matter what…any messages that I put on Schoology were always really positive. I wanted to let them know that they were doing great because I didn't know what their day was like." She didn't want to add any stress or more negativity to their lives. At one point in the interview she described her approach to her students during distance learning.

> I felt like my role in this was to provide consistency and support and to be positive and reinforcing for students. That you [a student] have someone here. I felt that my mindset changed to that, versus, 'You didn't turn in your assignment.' I felt like my role just kind of had to change.

All participants spoke of doing daily or weekly "check-ins" just to get a sense of how students were doing emotionally. Many included questions regarding how much time students were spending on their course or all of their courses daily. Other questions were intended to learn how students were doing emotionally, how they were processing all the immense changes imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and mandatory quarantine, and was their family situation stable and did they feel safe? Additionally, all participants indicated they were explicitly asking students whether there was anything they could do to help.

The welding teacher described his check-in questionnaires. “I asked things like, ‘What do you like best about distance learning? What is the worst thing for you about distance learning? What are you doing to keep yourself busy?”

One teacher reported always ending his questionnaires with, “Tell me *anything* [his emphasis] you feel like talking about with regard to how your week has gone.” Although he didn’t get many responses to this, he did share that one student told of her grandmother’s death and another reporting about a sick cat. He said he quickly responded to these students by phone or email to share his condolences and express empathy.

Teachers recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic brought turmoil to students’ lives that exceeded the complications of distance learning. One participant observed, “Kids that were emotionally in a good place when we had them [physically in the classroom], if one or two parents both lost their jobs or whatever, you know. That student is a very different person in a very different place now. It’s hard to know what switches have been flipped since I last saw them.” Another stated, “It was really tough for students emotionally, to not be with their peers…especially if they are in a home where they don’t have the positive encouragement or even like anyone there to give them any love.” The implication by this interviewee is that teachers give students love. Whether it be love in the form of a clear set of rules and expectations or through interaction. Teachers acknowledge students. They give them attention. Teenagers thrive on attention. Even the most timid students relish their name spoken either in greeting or in an example as the teacher explains a concept. Attention in as small a manner as eye contact can be a powerful self-esteem builder for adolescents. Self-esteem can also be positively impacted through interactions with peers. Most teenagers thrive on being with their friends.

One teacher addressed the inability for students to be with friends at school due to school closure as potentially detrimental to them emotionally. “My concerns for students is that they’re feeling alone in it. That they’re missing the relationship piece with their friends. They are missing the relationship piece with their teachers and other faculty. I think that piece is really important for learning.” Adaptive expertise teaches this. Educators understand the importance of relationships and connections between students as well and between teachers and students. They understood that not being physically together strained relationships and threatened students’ emotional health.

The need educators felt to move their emphasis to student well-being was shared by the participants. One pointed out that, “Some kids really struggled for reasons that were . . the fact that it was a crisis, or maybe parents lost their jobs. It was the unstructured, instability of it. The hardest part was really the uncontrolled. Like, how are kids doing? Like, with their mental health. What’s going to happen? Is this too much or too little work?” Teachers’ focus during distance learning involved sincere and genuine concern for student’s well-being.

All participants shared that their concern for students’ well-being went beyond concerns regarding their academic progress. Mental health seemed to override academic content, learning, and assessment. Participants’ comments related to this notion included, “My biggest concern was just that students were OK. I didn’t have the opportunity to talk to every student every day as I do so often in my classroom.” Someone else admitted, “The content itself doesn’t really worry me, but it’s the kids themselves and their well-being and their mental health – that’s my bigger concern.” Still another said, “My biggest concern for my students was their mental health needs. They are missing out on a lot of stuff. For example, several of my students are very big into band and choir and they are very excited about some activities this spring, and those things aren’t

going to happen, and kids are hugely disappointed." This teacher recognized that her students were coping with many losses, each compounding their stress, apathy, and loneliness. This resulted in some teachers become counselors for students.

Exemplifying the counselor role of teachers, one research participant alluded to the notion that students were needing them to play this role. She explained, "I had a couple of students that told me, 'I'm sorry. I haven't been able to keep up. I'm just really struggling.' I always tell them, 'Don't.' This should be your last priority. You need to first take care of your mental health."

Five of the ten educators interviewed spoke extensively regarding their attempts to communicate with students. One shared, "I did a *ton* [said with great emphasis] of phone calls home talking to families, talking to kids, trying to find out what's going on. 'Why are you not participating? Or, 'What can I do for you? Or, 'What do you need?' That sort of thing." Another stated, "I would send emails or leave phone messages, then wonder, if they're not responding, does that mean they're not OK?"

Several of the participants reflected on the link they made between students not submitting assignments and their elevated concern and desire to communicate directly with them. One social studies teacher reported, "I would send out a random email to kids that weren't submitting stuff just to try to check in and see if I could help them." Another teacher shared, "I called several parents at home. That is something I had never done before, and frankly am not very comfortable with, but I was concerned about students not doing assignments, not completing my check-ins."

As teachers, who in many ways during distance education also became counselors, connected with their students they were often met with anxiety, frustration, and a sense of loss on

the students' part. The special education teacher shared, "I had a junior call me and tell me, 'I can't do this. I need to be in class. I can't do this at home.' And my heart just broke." The world language teacher reported, "I would have students say, 'I'm really, really sorry. I got behind and now I felt like I couldn't catch up.' I have had several conversations with kids like this where the kids are in tears because they just feel hopeless at that point, once they got so far behind."

As their priorities became that of student's mental health, teachers attempted to support them in a variety of ways. One teacher explained, "I set up discussion boards in Schoology because every student that emailed me was like, 'I miss my friends!' So, I wanted to give them a platform where they could talk with their peers." She also shared, "We did Flipgrid and that went to a peer and I felt like this was their way of seeing each other . . . which they desperately needed."

One of the math teachers shared her tactic: "At first I set up Google Meet sessions for the class. I wanted to have those interactions. I think the kids wanted interaction. But as everyone was trying to balance everything, I think that it was almost overwhelming. The kids didn't really participate, and so, I just thought, 'I don't want this to be another thing if kids are just so overwhelmed.' So . . . I did online office hours every day and sometimes kids would pop in with math questions and sometimes they just wanted to talk about whatever. So, we would."

A science teacher summed up her stance in her role as teacher and pseudo-counselor. "Teachers are a go-to person for kids. We are mentors. We are a constant. We are a healthy place to be. Not to mention just being out of the house is healthy." Then she reflected on her attempts to maintain connections with students during distance learning. "I really thrive on building relationships with kids and now I had to do it without them here. That was a difficult challenge. I don't think I did it very well."

One teacher told of how she gave all her students and their parents/guardians her personal cell phone number and that they could text or call her anytime including evenings, nights and weekends. She explained how her intention as teacher, was to be available to help with students on their academics. She posted video explanations but knew students might still have questions. Very animatedly she said, “So the kids called me to ask questions . . . and I knew there was no possible way that they viewed the video. So I would ask them, ‘Hey, did you watch my cool video?’ Their responses were like, ‘Oh, oh no. I didn’t see that.’ They just wanted to talk.” So, in her newly acquired role as more of counselor or coach, she did just that. She said, “So, I just let them talk. We talked . . . about all kinds of things.” This demonstrated the shift in priority from academic progress for students to understanding the stresses of the situation and that students’ well-being must take precedent.

One participant linked Governor Walz’s announcement on May 1, that distance learning was to continue until the end of the school year, as having significant impact on the emotional well-being of students and the change in behavior it elicited. “I saw a huge drop off in engagement. No work was coming in from students. I wasn’t getting emails or calls like I had been. Basically, like every student just stopped working for about eight days and so I really reigned back my expectation.” In her role as educator, she wanted to continue encouraging and supporting them in their academic progress. However, as she was concerned as to the disappointment, frustration, loss, and sadness this announcement possibly brought many students, she adjusted her academic expectations for them. Mental health needs trumped school work.

One participant reflected on the potentially positive aspects of distance learning on a student’s mental health during distance learning. She shared her perspective on the opportunity

the COVID-19 crisis offered everyone. “Think about our phones, technology. I feel like we are always being stimulated by everything. This gave us time to just stop. Kids were able to get away from that a bit.”

Teacher Takeaways

Takeaways to Future Teaching in the Traditional Classroom Setting

All the teachers interviewed were very reflective in their assessment of their experiences with distance learning. Their comments related to what they will take forward into their teaching practices in the classroom model and also in the distance learning scenario. Several also shared the impact of the experience on their profession as educators.

Six of the 10 teachers spoke specifically of how adapting to distance learning will impact their content, delivery, or assessment in the future. A social studies teacher stated, “It has really caused me just to think more about what is important in what I’m teaching. What the core knowledge and understandings are in my courses. They became evident this spring. I was forced to focus on them.” This is evidence that during distance learning she pared down to the basics and in doing so, re-evaluated the core outcomes or learning targets for students. She has added to her adaptive expertise and can apply this in her future practice.

A science teacher agreed, stating, “It just made me realize that you have to bring it [course concepts and information] down to the essential. It made me really look at what is essential and what is optional. What do we really want kids to learn?” She continued to explain how so often she gets caught up in various topics and lessons and activities. “It’s all good stuff! After teaching for 23 years I’ve got a lot up my sleeve. In distance learning we couldn’t do it all. I had to choose.” Her decisions for content revolved around the learning targets she had posted in

her classroom. With only minimal time, the importance of using that time most efficiently and effectively was a must.

Another teacher addressed the impact of distance learning on content differently. She said, “It has really caused me to evaluate the pacing that I go at, the depth that we go to, how we can enrich those that are doing awesome, and how we can support those who aren’t.” She elaborated that in the spring, with all students learning remotely, she offered students very diluted lessons and assignments. It became evident they were very easy and more like “busy work” for many of her students. Her perception was that others struggled. “But I had to give them all something. Never seeing them or talking with them in class . . . I really didn’t know who was understanding and how well.” The need to differentiate became very apparent to her.

Similarly, another teacher considered the practice of giving every student the same work with the same expectations, as highlighting the inequities that exist in the current educational model. “It really has highlighted the pitfalls of public education,” she said. “Why is it that all need to know x,y,z? Why are we forcing everybody to learn this content? There is no recognition of difference in abilities, need for modifications, pacing, etc. We are not addressing needs of individual students. That became so clear to me during distance learning.” In her adaptive expertise, she knew that no two of her students were alike. She knew that she had the “teacher tools” to help each of those students as she had done with students during each of her previous years as a teacher. Yet just as COVID-19 brought so many good things to a screeching halt, her ability and opportunities to making modifications for individual students and differentiate her instruction came to a screeching halt.

Three of the ten teachers interviewed considered distance learning a forced experiment for considering different models, or different schedules for student learning. The tech ed teacher

shared, “School . . . sitting in a desk seven hours a day doesn’t work for many students. Maybe this is a wake-up call to look at doing things differently.”

One math teacher also reflected this notion. “Let’s look ahead now. What can we learn from remote learning? It worked for some students. The flexibility they had, no distractions from other kids, being able to do work when they wanted, where they wanted . . . that was a big plus.”

One science teacher felt that this experience should be a “conversation-starter.” He explained, “This is an opportunity to kind of break down the walls of the school building. We are, I think, very much in an industrial age educational system where this is the hub of learning. I would be in favor of us looking at the entire educational delivery system and thinking about new ways of doing it.” He considered distance learning an experiment in education done differently and hoped it would get everyone thinking and talking about change.

Takeaways for Future Distance Teaching and Learning

All teachers, at one point or another in our interviews, anticipated the fall semester and what the format and expectations would be. Eight of the ten spoke of the need to have more structure, expectations, and rigor in any future distance learning scenario. One stated, “I think it is fully appropriate to say that students will be expected to spend 40-50 minutes per day on coursework.” Three mentioned the need for student accountability in completing coursework satisfactorily. Although they acknowledged the spring as a crisis situation when we all did the best we could, and the focus on student well-being was warranted, they agreed that in the future there had to be more academic content and academic rigor.

To be effective in future teaching and learning situations where all content would be delivered electronically, nine of the ten teachers pointed out the need for teacher, and in some cases student, technology training. They spoke of the need for more training for themselves on

the use of Schoology and all of its features, various iPad applications, and Zoom or other video conferencing tools. One teacher admitted, “I know I wasn’t very effective this spring and that was, at least partly, due to my limited use of some of the apps. Even getting things posted in Schoology was a big obstacle for me. I need more training with the technology.”

Future as Professional Educators

Five of the ten teachers spoke very candidly about the impact of their experiences with distance learning on their future in the profession. One stated, “I think I realized that if I don’t get to be in the building with my students, I don’t know that I can do this for much longer. In-person is what makes education work to the best of its ability.” The music teacher concurred, “It is not at all what I would want to do long term down the road. This is *not* my style of teaching. I got into teaching a long time ago – well over 40 years. I didn’t have any expectations of something like this. But I guess that’s probably true for anybody who only began a year ago.”

Another shared, “I tell my students, ‘I’m an addict. I get my high from teaching.’ I love interactions with kids, seeing their faces. I love teaching a difficult concept, seeing their faces full of confusion, then getting to the end and the looks they have when they understand – that’s my drug … and you don’t get that with distance learning.” Later in the interview she confessed, “Distance learning – I’m not a fan. I don’t know if I can stay in this profession if this is how it’s gonna be.” Lacking the expertise to smoothly adapt to a new teaching environment and realizing their desire to interact with students physically present in a room, these teachers acknowledged the genuine loss they felt in being forced to a distance teaching and learning model. The loss of so many aspects of their profession and their passion, prompted teachers to consider changing their career track.

The findings in this research study reflect teachers' need to draw upon their adaptive expertise to meet the demands of transitioning to and carrying out distance learning resulting in modifications to academic content, assessment of student learning, and their priorities with regards to students. Additionally, the findings indicate that teachers constructed new knowledge that they can apply in future traditional classroom settings or that of distance learning. Also surfacing was how their experiences prompted them to intentionally and honestly consider how distance teaching and learning may impact their future as educators. The data that emerged from the phenomena of their lived experiences during the spring of 2020 when schools were closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that although their adaptive expertise did not fully serve teachers in the distance learning model, it did assist them in trudging through the landscape, however awkwardly, and learning from their experiences.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research project was to understand the experiences of high school teachers in transitioning courses from a traditional classroom setting to that of distance learning as a result of school closures due to the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic. The study sought to explain how educators modified content, delivery, and assessment methods to engage students and maintain academic expectations without overwhelming them or adding undue stress in a crisis situation and any new understandings or knowledge these teacher acquired during this time.

The data indicates that teachers modified their course content due to an imposed time constraint for student work in each course, an all-electronic delivery method, and a concern for student's mental health and well-being. These factors in influencing content impacted the continuity and rigor of the coursework. Additionally, data suggests that teachers focused on student engagement with the curriculum offered and did little to no formal assessment. Another theme that evolved from the data was that of teachers shifting their focus from academics and students learning knowledge and skills, to prioritizing student emotional well-being.

Historical Impact

As indicated in the literature, educational disruptions have occurred periodically in various geographical locations throughout the United States for a variety of different reasons, including health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, situates itself as prompting the first

ever nationwide closure of schools. This event was monumental in both the number of teachers and students impacted as well as in the duration of the disruption. Teachers across the country were forced to transition to an alternative education model, one that would allow students to continue learning without physically entering a building for anywhere from three to four months. The findings of this study shed light on teachers' experiences during this unforseen and unprecedented event and reveal the feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and loss as they were forced to transition and adapt. Although equipped with adaptive expertise that traditionally enables them to make decisions to enhance and benefit students in their academic progress, the outcomes of this study demonstrate that the teacher participants struggled due to a void in their expertise when confronted with the novel and abupt disruption caused by the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic.

Educational Challenges

The findings of this study align with the literature in regards to limited administrative intervention or direction for teachers. This resulted in every individual educator needing to navigate and manage alone as they moved to and conducted distance teaching with their students. The imposed time constraint, as really the only demand from administration mentioned by study participants, aligned with reports in the literature that school leaders tended to take a "hands-off" stance during the period of distance learning as they were unprepared to support teachers (Baird, 2020). Although mentioned in previous studies, interview data from this study did not indicate that district administrators formally recommended, nor did study participants choose to rely heavily on, the online educational materials offered free by numerous educational organizations. Teachers chose instead to draw upon their adaptive expertise and their personal

collections of academic resources and activities to continue to engage and educate their students. In doing so, they encountered several challenges.

Among these challenges, as identified and supported in the findings of this study, was the need for teachers to pare down course content and pacing. The difficulty teachers spoke of with regard to having to pick and choose content reflects the experiences as reported in previous literature (Gewin, 2020; Kaden, 2020). Participants in this study shared the difficulty they experienced with this necesity. Whether this was a result of their past experiences and expertise in knowing that they were being forced to eliminate valuable learning materials and opportunities for students, or a lingering hope that they would return to their classrooms with students before the end of the school year, teachers struggled to "let go" of much of their course content.

Educational Impact

Additional contributions of this study to the existing literature reflect the impact of the constraints of distance learning, specifically those of a time constraint and digital delivery method on the rigor and continuity of academic content educators offered their students. In scanning the literature, there were no articles, columns, nor research that addressed this phenomenon. My study begins to fill a gap in the research as it delves into the impact of the educational disruption caused by the pandemic on academic content.

Study participants spoke of the challenge of teaching without students physically in their classrooms. The loss of student cues and its impact on teaching supports findings in previous studies (Fagell, 2020). Student facial expressions and body language can be powerful as a teacher's adaptive expertise allows them to read these and direct their teaching practice as a

result. A distance learning format, without these cues and little to no informal feedback from students as they were exposed to academic content, likely impacted their learning.

Student Well-being

I was surprised to find that a concerted focus on student well-being emerged from the interview data. This, however, was well warranted according to the literature. Concerns around quarantine and the confinement to homes and the lack of peer and teacher interaction, compounded by the fear and uncertainty of the emergency situation of the pandemic, was well supported in the limited literature available (Dorn et al., 2020; Vu et al., 2020; Walters, 2020). Although the literature validated students' need for emotional support, the findings of this study reflect how this impacted teachers' lived experiences and directly influenced their decisions regarding academic content, assessment, and in some instances, their communication and how available they made themselves for their students.

Interpretations and Implications

The findings indicate that although the experiences of the teacher participants varied, the commonalities were evident in terms of modifying content due to a mandated time restriction, limited delivery method and concerns for students' mental health. This modification resulted in a significant decrease in overall rigor and a loss of continuity in the content presented. Additionally, the findings suggest that during distance learning, many teachers shifted their focus from academic progress and assessment of their students to that of simply seeking learner engagement in some way and supporting their students emotionally.

The findings add to the emerging body of literature related to education during the time of COVID-19, specifically the experiences of educators. The results align with literature reflecting the confusion and frustration of teachers during the pandemic. This research provides

insight into the lived experiences of educators who navigated distance teaching with little to nothing to draw from with regards to their adaptive expertise and very little guidance or support from school leaders. The data contributes to a clearer understanding of teachers' experiences with distance learning during the extended period of national emergency as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide closures of all educational facilities during the spring of 2020.

Recommendations

The participants in this study certainly agreed that they did not want to engage in another extended period of distance learning. Although some alluded to the opportunities distance learning offered to consider alternative scheduling and flexibility for students in their secondary academic journey, all were hoping for a full return to in-person learning for the fall of 2020.

As history and the COVID-19 pandemic have proven, educational disruptions occur. Policy makers, district leaders, educators, and teacher preparation program decision makers have a responsibility to learn from the experiences of teachers and to plan and prepare for future educational disruptions – both small and localized, or potentially to a similar magnitude of the spring of 2020. For this reason, the following recommendations are directed towards each of these groups.

Policy Makers

The outcomes of this research study reveal that the experiences of teachers in transitioning to and carrying out distance learning were impactful to them as educators as well as to their students. The findings strongly suggest that much of the impact was negative. Teachers were left alone to scramble to choose content and how best to deliver it to students. They struggled to balance academic content and rigor, knowing the importance of student social-

emotional health while having limited means of knowing how their students were doing during an overwhelmingly stressful time. Students received less rigorous content, often disconnected from other course material, and were not accurately assessed in their competencies.

These identified negative impacts of school closure require that policy makers be cautious and consider all possible alternatives and consequences of their decisions in this matter. They must be diligent in gathering all necessary data and collaborative in their discussions and work with the appropriate experts and representatives from stakeholder groups when cogitating the idea of closing schools for any reason.

Additionally, policy makers must support efforts to prepare constituents and train educators to be most efficient and effective in future distance teaching and learning situations. Whether this be in the area of ensuring internet access and devices to all homes no matter how rural or providing professional development for teachers in determining content as well as in the technology required for delivery and reception of course materials and student work.

The interview data collected in this study alluded to the unique opportunity distance learning provided to consider alternative educational models, flexible scheduling and individualized instruction. As the likelihood of future disruptions exists, policy makers should examine the current educational model and allow reforms that improve the quality of education while allowing for the flexibility and innovation necessary in a distance learning scenario.

District and School Leaders

Educational leaders at the district and school level too, must support the professional development of teachers with regards to their abilities to teach students remotely. Allowed to assess and focus on their local schools and community, these administrators must prepare to advocate for and support their teachers, students, and families in any future educational

disruptions. This includes training teachers. It also includes a type of "training" for students and their families to guide them to maximize student academic success and progress. With input from teachers, parents, and students, administrators need to establish consistent protocol and expectations for these groups.

A primary recommendation resulting from this study is that school districts provide the technology and training required to engage in distance teaching and learning successfully. Teachers experienced significant frustrations and limitations as a result of their lack of training in teaching exclusively via the internet. Some students experienced a degree of inequity in their education due to lack of internet access or unfamiliarity with the required technology. Although the students of all the teacher participants in this study had been issued iPads with which to continue their academic learning, inability to use them efficiently, lack of internet access in their homes, or chaotic distance learning environments greatly impeded their progress. School districts must find a way to ensure this access via hotspots, devices with built in cellular coverage or other means.

Per the experiences of the participants in this study, the 20 minutes allotted daily per course, was insufficient, as was the completely asynchronous format. Students need to have a scheduled period of time that they are to access materials, be in a video conference with their teachers and classmates, and complete coursework and assessments. A scheduled period of "office hours" for every teacher should be required, along with periodic one-to-one conferencing between teacher and each student. This would assist in building relationships as well allowing for individual instruction, clarification, and/or enrichment.

As study participants mentioned, distance learning allows a unique opportunity for individualized teaching and learning. This should be capitalized upon in future distance learning settings and its potential considered within the traditional setting as well.

To address the social-emotional well-being of students during a future distance learning scenario, it is recommended that a mental health component be integrated into the school day or week for students. Perhaps lead by school counselors or other professionals, these could include team-building activities such as virtual scavenger hunts, or groups projects or videos in which individuals collaborate via the internet to create something with peers. Other ideas include time management or goal setting seminars, motivational speakers, or career exploration opportunities as one study participant indicating finding valuable for his students. Even such things as trivia games, yoga or aerobic exercise sessions, craft projects, or cooking experiences could be carried out via a distance format. All of these would be intended to disrupt the monotony and isolation of quarantine and confinement.

A final important recommendation for school leaders involves teacher support, retention, and recruitment. As communicated by teachers in this study, their experiences with distance learning ignited doubts about their future in the capacity as professional educators. Firstly, district officials and decision makers must find ways to support teachers during times of change and disruption. Secondly, they must prepare for filling vacancies when teachers choose to leave positions, possibly abruptly. Thirdly, they must continually recruit professionals who demonstrate adaptive expertise, a desire to continue to develop that expertise, and who have the grit, persistence and resilience to operate in times of educational disruption.

Teachers

This study prompts several recommendations for educators to enhance their adaptive expertise in both a traditional classroom setting as well as in that of distance learning. Teachers must pursue professional development opportunities, especially in the area of using technology as the medium for educational materials and student work. Equally important is that teachers who found success during their experience with distance learning find or create avenues to share details of that success with colleagues and other teaching professionals. My study proves that teachers managed and learned from their experiences. They added to their adaptive expertise. Sharing their learnings with others enhances the collective professional expertise of a school, district and educators as a whole.

Several research participants noted the need to identify the essential core knowledge, understandings and skills expected of students. Future distance teaching and learning situations must require that academic content area teachers agree on the key concepts to be taught and mastered, and that they are presented in such a way that they build on each other and establish a continuity, as they do in the traditional classroom setting. Additionally, content area teachers should agree on manageable assessment techniques and projects which allow students to demonstrate their mastery of concepts.

Teachers must seek the proper training to enable a greater chance of success in the distance teaching format. Likewise, they must acquire the skills and strategies to train their students to be successful in a distance learning format. This includes instruction for students on proper video conferencing etiquette, such as how and when to enable microphones and video cameras, how to change backgrounds to block view of home environments, as well as things like no pets or siblings on camera, using the chat feature, and protocol for breakout rooms. Perhaps

these expectations are offered to all students throughout a school district to provide continuity and a consistent message. That could prove very effective. However, what is paramount to teachers if this is the case, is that they are able to come to consensus on the expectations and agree to enforce them in their classes.

Additionally, for successful future distance learning, both educators and students need training in navigating the learning management system subscribed to by their particular school district, along with training to use a variety of applications such as Notability, Nearpod, EdPuzzle, Explain Everything, and Flipgrid, to mention just a few. Teachers in individual schools could collaborate to agree on the three or four applications they will agree to use, thus allowing for more efficient use of training time and offering consistency for students.

Teacher content along with pedagogical knowledge combined with their adaptive expertise are instrumental in student learning. Teachers have the responsibility to demand from school and district leadership that they have the support, training and resources to conduct teaching in any environment they are expected to operate in.

Teacher Preparation Program Decision Makers

Every college or university department of education or other teacher preparation program must examine how best to prepare their students for the educational disruptions that could possibility impact their professional experiences. Along with the training to conduct teaching online via a learning management system, these future educators must be prepared to manage and respond promptly and respectfully to student and parent emails, advocate for support and training from school administrators, and acknowledge and address their own personal physical and mental health needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study shares the experiences of teachers during a period of distance learning and their need to modify content, delivery and assessment, along with a change in their focus from student academic progress to student well-being. Just as it informs of the many challenges teachers faced, it exposes numerous areas for further study. The overarching topic of educational disruption could be explored in relation to student achievement, teacher mental health, or teachers leaving the profession. Within in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on education, possible directions for research include student attendance, engagement, mental health, and coping strategies. To hone in on student academic progress, the study of the inequities which seemed to be exacerbated during distance learning, and the impact of those on the achievement gap in education across the nation could be explored. Also worthy of study is how the distance format was beneficial to many students as they did not have to manage the complexities of attending school with their peers every day, were allowed to work at their own pace, and possibly received one-to-one interaction and assistance from their teachers. Additionally, I would recommend studies to examine the impact of the pandemic on parents' perceptions of teachers' roles and responsibilities. Other possibilities might involve the notion of quarantine for educators, reading student cues while video conferencing, and how adaptations teachers made during distance learning directly impacted their future practice in either a face-to-face or a distance environment.

The extreme disruption of the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic during the spring of 2020 opened the floodgates with regards to educational topics worthy of pursuit. My study situates itself in the literature with regards to teachers' experiences. Its findings led to several recommendations and possibilities for additional research.

Conclusions

The full impact of school closures and the move to distance learning as a result of the COVID-19 / Coronavirus pandemic on teachers will never be known. The best we can do is seek to know and understand the experiences of educators during this time. The conclusion of this study is that teachers' decisions with regards to course content were influenced by an imposed time constraint and delivery method as well as their concern for students' emotional well-being, which became their priority, in lieu of academic content. Additionally, teachers indicated that their experiences will impact their future teaching both in the traditional setting as well as in that of distance learning if required again in the future, if they continue in the profession.

This study and its findings make evident the genuine need for additional research as to the experiences of teachers during the pandemic and the period of distance learning. Of great concern and in need of attention is that of teachers' mental health and their considerations of leaving the profession if distance learning must continue in some capacity in the future. There is certainly a need for extensive research in the area of what type of training, particularly in terms of using technology, might most benefit educators and students. This would be valuable to school leaders and teachers and applicable to both a remote and traditional classroom setting. Another avenue for research would be to address in detail, the content changes teachers made in various academic areas to accommodate the constraints of distance learning, as well as how a project-based model of education aligns within the parameters of distance teaching and learning. These are only a few possibilities as the opportunities for further research are numerous.

Final Personal Reflection

Personally, this project, while engaging and valuable, was also cathartic. As the COVID-19 pandemic ran amok, creating havoc on all facets of my personal life as well as that of my

family, friends, students, colleagues, and all people everywhere, I needed a means of processing the uncertainty, disorientation, and grief. I was experiencing a sincere and deeply nagging grief. Grief over the end of so much that was familiar and comfortable – my professional setting and responsibilities, seeing family and friends face-to-face, hugging them, attending church services and hockey games, and enjoying public settings without a mask and eliminating the assumptions by all as to what wearing or not wearing one said about me as a person. In an effort to find something positive and productive in all this, something over which I felt I had some control, I invented, articulated, and carried out this research project. Determined to live by faith instead of fear, I moved forward with the faith that exploring the experiences of other teachers during the time of distance learning would help me emotionally, potentially help them, and ultimately help others if remote learning again becomes the format required for teaching and learning.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Distance Learning Plan Template

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Distance Learning Plan Template

This template is intended to support Minnesota school districts and charters in ensuring they have meaningful, relevant, and equitable learning plans in place to address the needs of all students. Districts are not required to use this template and can use whatever formats support their distance learning programming. Districts are not asked to submit their distance learning plans to MDE.

Distance Learning Defined: Students engaging in distance learning have access to appropriate educational materials and receive daily interaction with their licensed teacher(s).

It is important to note that distance learning does not always mean e-learning or online learning. It is critical to provide this learning in a format that can be equitably accessed by all students.

School districts and charters can find additional planning resources at the MDE COVID-19 Updates page.

Overall Equity Considerations

- Who are the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other marginalized groups that are affected by the distance learning plan? What are the potential impacts on these groups?
- Does the distance learning plan ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences? Who does the distance learning plan benefit?
- How have we intentionally involved stakeholders who are also members of the communities affected by the distance learning plan? How have stakeholders and community members validated or invalidated our conclusions to questions 1 and 2?
- List all the potential barriers (structural, human, financial, community, etc.) to more equitable outcomes related to the distance learning plan.
- How will we mitigate the negative impacts and address the barriers identified above?
- Once the distance learning plan has been implemented, how will we gather and use the input from those impacted?
- What qualitative and quantitative evidence will we gather and analyze to determine the effects of the distance learning plan?

Template

1. How are we ensuring students have access to appropriate educational materials, including technology?

Additional considerations

- If we are using an online learning system, how are we ensuring it can effectively support the district's unique learning and teaching needs, including the ability to provide differentiated instruction as well as one-on-one support for students who need it?
- If we are using an online learning system, what additional options are being made for students and families who will not have access to this system? How will we ensure that the options are of the same, if not better, quality than the system students and families cannot access?
- If we are delivering materials or asking families to pick up materials, who are the families that will have barriers to getting materials? How will we address those barriers?
- How are we ensuring that a variety of educational resources that reflect multiple and silenced perspectives are being identified and used?
- How are we ensuring that our distance learning model is secure and will not allow for the release of protected student or staff information?
- Additional student instruction resources.

Our plan:

2. How are we ensuring students receive daily interaction with their licensed teacher(s)?

Additional considerations

- How are we defining engagement and student-teacher interactions? What are our expectations?
- How are families' perspectives and experiences centered in our efforts to engage students in learning and interactions with their teachers?
- How will we determine and support the various modes by which teachers can interact and engage with students?
- How will teachers be culturally responsive and relevant during their distant learning interactions with students?
- How will we utilize support staff to engage with students and families?
- How will we differentiate instruction for various levels of learning?
- What are we doing differently for students in daycare settings, both on and off school grounds?

Our plan:

3. How will we support the mental health needs of students?

Additional considerations

- What information will we share with families regarding mental health services and supports?
- What community resources and partnerships can be used or leveraged to help support students and families?
- How can online resources and resources that don't require internet access be used to support students and families?

- How will we support students who are not connected to a mental health provider?
- How will we assist families in obtaining medical assistance benefits?
- How will we assist students who are participating in telehealth options via school linked mental health providers?
- What information will we provide to help staff and families talk with students about COVID-19 and its impact?
- How will we proactively address bullying?

Our plan:

4. How will the needs of students with IEPs be met?

Additional considerations

- How will lessons be delivered to accommodate students with 504 plans?
- How will students receive support from their teachers and support staff?
- What online and non-internet mandatory resources are available to help support students with IEPs?
- How will we measure IEP goals? How will data be collected?
- How will we ensure we meet evaluation requirements within legal timelines?
- Additional special education resources.

Our plan:

5. How will we ensure students have internet access as needed?

Additional considerations

- How can we work with local internet providers to obtain internet access for students and families?
- Keeping in mind that all areas will not have the capacity to offer internet access to students and families, what additional options can be used to get students and families the materials, resources and support that they need?

Our plan:

6. How will meal delivery or distribution occur?

Additional considerations

- If we are delivering meals or asking families to pick up meals, who are the families that will have barriers to getting materials? How will we address those barriers?
- If we are delivering or asking families to pick up meals for multiple days, how will we ensure homeless students can refrigerate and store food?

- Additional food and nutrition resources.

Our plan:

7. How will we support our English Learners?

Additional considerations

- How will we provide legally required English language development instruction for English learners?
- How will mainstream teachers provide supports for English learners within their distance learning instruction?
- How will we communicate distance learning plans to multilingual, multicultural families including translation and interpretation needs? How will we build collaborative networks with community elders, bilingual staff, and cultural organizations to help with outreach and communication?
- Additional English learner programming guidance.

Our plan:

8. How will the needs of students experiencing homelessness be met?

Additional considerations

- Do we know which students are experiencing homelessness?
- Do we have methods in place to maintain communication with students experiencing homelessness?
- How can we ensure families have access to needed supports?
- How are we utilizing our liaisons, school counselors, school social workers, and other relevant personnel to conduct outreach?
- How are we working with our community to ensure access to virtual or distance learning opportunities?

Our plan:

9. How will Early Learning occur?

Additional considerations

- Since preschool learners are not as independent as older learners, how will learning be embedded in routines so families are not overwhelmed?
- How will we support families of our youngest learners in using screen time as a support to, and not instead of, adult-child interaction?
- How will activities accommodate hands-on experiences when families may not have a variety of materials? How will materials be provided, delivered and returned?
- How will all learning areas be addressed such as creative play, real-life exploration, physical activity, language development, and social interactions?

- How might family members like grandparents and older siblings support the young child's learning?
- Additional prekindergarten distance learning guidance.

Our plan:

10. How will we assess our students?

Additional considerations

- What do we believe about assessments and what they are meant to do?
- What are the various ways by which students will be assessed for proficiency?
- How will we report students' progress?

Our plan:

11. How will we regularly communicate with families?

Additional considerations

- How are families' perspectives and experiences centered in our communication plan?
- How are we communicating with families who speak a language other than English?
- How are we ensuring families understand our distance learning model? Use of the model? Student expectations?
- What are the platforms or apps that adults, students, and families utilize the most? How can these be leveraged to get information to students and families?

Our plan:

12. How will we address the needs of our tribal communities?

Additional considerations

- How are we ensuring our plan is not dependent on students having internet access?
- Who will be our consistent Indian Education point person to communicate with and advocate for students and their families?
- What is our plan to regularly communicate with American Indian families?
- How are we partnering and coordinating our services with local tribes, community organizations, and/or MDE Indian Education personnel to support students and their families?

Our plan:

13. How will we utilize partnerships to meet the needs of vulnerable students?

Additional considerations

- How are we utilizing programming options for school nurses, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, paraprofessionals, and other school specialists and cultural liaisons?
- Who are our community partners and how are we collaborating to meet students' needs?
- Additional resources and guidance on supporting students.

Our plan:

14. How will we meet the needs of staff?

Additional considerations

- How will we ensure consistent, clear communications exist across all staff?
- How are we providing initial and ongoing training to our staff on our distance learning model and expectations? How will we address problems of practice as they occur?
- How will we regularly observe distance learning and provide feedback to teachers and staff?
- How will teachers continue to collaborate in professional learning communities, grade-level teams, subject-area teams, etc.?
- How are we supporting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of our staff?
- How will we ensure the resources and professional development available to staff include instruction and guidance on culturally responsive and relevant distant instruction?

Our plan:

15. How are we tracking attendance of students and staff?

Additional considerations

- How is attendance being defined? Are there additional ways by which attendance can be defined or achieved?
- How are we communicating attendance procedures and expectations to students and families?
- How are our practices for tracking attendance equitable? What considerations are we making for students and families that cannot connect via the internet?

Our plan:

16. How will we assess and adjust our distance learning plan during implementation?

Additional considerations

- What data and information will we collect to assess the implementation and impacts of our distance learning plan?
- Who will monitor impacts? How frequently?
- How will impacts be communicated to appropriate stakeholders, including families?
- How will we monitor whether our distance learning plan is benefitting some students and presenting learning barriers to others?

Our plan:

Appendix B

Email Sent to Colleagues as Invitation to Participate in the Research Study

DEAR TEACHING COLLEAGUES,

I AM CONDUCTING RESEARCH TO EXPLORE YOUR EXPERIENCES IN TRANSITIONING FROM A TRADITIONAL FACE-TO-FACE CLASSROOM SETTING, TO THAT OF DISTANCE LEARNING. I HAVE SECURED APPROVAL FROM BUILDING ADMINISTRATION AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA TO CARRY OUT THIS PROJECT. I AM INVITING YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS PROJECT WHICH WILL CONSIST OF TWO INTERVIEWS WITH THE RESEARCHER, LISA A. ROSS-HAIN. THE FIRST INTERVIEW WILL HAPPEN IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. ANOTHER INTERVIEW WILL TAKE PLACE LATER IN JUNE. EACH INTERVIEW WILL LAST APPROXIMATELY ONE HOUR AND WILL BE CONDUCTED VIA ZOOM VIDEO CONFERENCING. PLEASE CONTACT LISA ROSS-HAIN WITH ANY QUESTIONS OR IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING.

--
Lisa Hain Spanish Instructor
Grand Rapids High School Grand Rapids, Minnesota
Google Voice #218-248-75 7

Appendix C
Consent to Participate in Research

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title:	Transitions in Tumultuous Times: Teachers and Distance Learning Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic
Principal Investigator:	Lisa A. Ross-Hain
Phone/Email Address:	218-244-4688 lisa.rosshain@und.edu
Department:	Teaching, Leadership & Professional Practices
Research Advisor: **Phone/Email Address:**	Mary Baker 701-741-0822 mary.baker@und.edu

What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. Whether you take part is up to you.
- If you don't take part, it won't be held against you.
- You can take part now and later drop out, and it won't be held against you
- If you don't understand, ask questions.
- Ask all the questions you want before you decide.

How long will I be in this research?

Your involvement as a participant is limited to 2 interviews over the course of two months, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to collect data regarding teachers experiences in transitioning to a distance learning platform as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?

If you decide to take part in this research study, you will be interviewed regarding your experiences in transitioning to and conducting distance learning with students. The initial interview will be conducted during May 2020, and will last approximately 1 hour in length. The

Date: _____
Subject Initials: _____

second interview will take place 3-4 weeks later and will also be approximately 1 hour in length. Both interviews will be audio-recorded.

Could being in this research hurt me?
There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this research.

Will being in this research benefit me?
It is not expected that you will personally benefit from this research.

Possible benefits to others include an increase in knowledge gained from the research.

How many people will participate in this research?
Ten to fifteen people will take part in this study at Grand Rapids High School.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?
You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?
You will not be paid for being in this research study.

Who is funding this research?
The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

What happens to information collected for this research?
Your private information may be shared with individuals and organizations that conduct or watch over this research, including:

- The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research
- Mary Baker, Research Advisor at UND

We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. We protect your information from disclosure to others to the extent required by law. We cannot promise complete secrecy.

Data or specimens collected in this research will not be used or distributed for future research studies, even if identifiers are removed.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court or to tell authorities if we believe you have abused a child, or you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Date: _____
Subject Initials: _____

As the interviews conducted in this research will be audio recorded, you have the right to review/edit the recordings. Please contact the researcher. Only the researcher and the research advisor will have access to the recordings which will be stored on a clip drive in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office until written transcription is complete, at which time the audio recordings of the interviews will be erased from the clip drive and the clip drive will be destroyed. At the time of transcription, participants will be assigned pseudonyms and from this point forward, no identifying information will accompany the transcribed interviews. These written transcriptions will be passcode protected documents stored on a passcode protected laptop computer and used for educational purpose only.

The written transcriptions and other data that had been stored on the laptop will be destroyed three years from the date of project completion. At that time all data stored in electronic form including transcriptions documents will be deleted from the laptop and emptied from the laptop trash. All paper materials including printed transcriptions, consent forms, researcher notes, and project drafts will be shredded.

What if I agree to be in the research and then change my mind?
You may, at any time, remove yourself from this project with no repercussions. If you decide to leave the study early, we ask that you inform the researcher, Lisa A. Ross-Hain by emailing her at lhain@isd318.org.

Who can answer my questions about this research?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think this research has hurt you or made you sick, contact the research team at the emails listed above on the first page.

This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies. You may talk to them at 701.777.4279 or UND.irb@UND.edu if:

- You have questions, concerns, or complaints that are not being answered by the research team.
- You are not getting answers from the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone else about the research.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You may also visit the UND IRB website for more information about being a research subject: http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.html

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subject's Name: _____

Date: _____
Subject Initials: _____

_____ _____

Signature of Subject Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject's legally authorized representative.

_____ _____

Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent Date

Date: _____

Subject Initials: _____

Appendix D
First Interview – Open Questions

1) Tell me about your priorities or guiding principles as you design activities for distance learning.
2) Tell me whether your course content has changed. How? Why?
3) Tell me about the expectations you have of your students during distance learning.
4) Tell me how you plan to assess your students' knowledge and skills.
5) Tell me what you consider the primary challenges of distance learning.
6) Tell me of any benefits to distance learning for students that you see.
7) Tell me if and how you are attempting to monitor student workload in order to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed or unnecessarily stressed, while maintaining your academic expectations.
8) Tell me about your biggest concern regarding distance learning for your students.
9) Tell me about your hope for students and/or education during and after this period of distance learning.
10) Tell me whether transitioning to and carrying out distance learning with your students has effected/impacted/changed you as a professional educator.
11) Tell me about your comfort level with the technology required to carry out distance learning.

Appendix E
Follow-up (Second) Interview – Open Questions

1) Tell me to what extent students met the expectations you had for them.
2) Tell me what you consider the primary challenges of distance learning.
3) Tell me of any benefits to distance learning for students that you see.
4) Tell me to what degree your attempt at monitoring workload in order to prevent students from feeling overwhelmed or unnecessarily stressed was successful.
5) Tell me about your biggest concern regarding distance learning.
6) Tell me what you/we have learned about education during this period of distance learning that you/we can apply to improve education in the future.
7) Tell me whether transitioning to and carrying out distance learning with your students has effected/impacted/changed you as a professional educator.
8) Tell me about your experiences with technology use during the time of distance learning.

Note: Additional questions were posed to individual research participants based on their first interview responses. These, as guided by the research questions, were intended to solicit enhanced and more detailed descriptions of participants' experiences.

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