

**TEACHING DURING A PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON
THE SELF-EFFICACY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN
PROVIDING VIRTUAL EDUCATION TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

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***Indicates University of Admission**

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my wife Pam. In every way, she has been my strongest support, encouraging and even at times forcing me to continue to persevere with this project. Without her constant support and patience, I would not have been able to achieve each of my academic goals. She has been with me in my failures and successes, and this success will be one that is just as much hers as it is mine. This project is also dedicated to my two girls. I hope that I have shown them that continued learning is important. They have watched as I have struggled and persevered throughout this dissertation process and have been my continuous cheerleaders. This project is dedicated to my mother, who always knew that I could achieve whatever I wanted and never let me give up. This project is also dedicated to my grandfather who, even though he is no longer with us, was the first to talk to me about going to college, about teaching, and about opportunities outside of our small community. This project is dedicated to my father. My dad is the hardest working man I have ever known. He was a coal miner, a carpenter, a butcher, and handyman. He did whatever he had to do to support our family, and he always told me to learn to work with my mind and not my hands. My dad did not want me to work the way he did; he had a different vision. My dad recognized the opportunities that were out there for those who were willing to work at getting an education, whether in a trade area or in higher education. When I graduated as an undergraduate and got my first teaching job, my dad asked me, "What is next?" When I received my first master's degree, again, my dad asked, "What is next?" When I received my second master's degree and my principal and special education supervisor certifications, again he asked, "What is next?" Dad, I cannot tell you how much that

simple question has directed my academic journey, and I am sure that even now you will ask yet again, “What is next?”

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Chapter One

In December of 2019, a coronavirus caused by SARS-CoV-2 and named COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China (USA.gov, 2021). The COVID-19 virus is transmitted from person to person through respiratory droplets expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks (USA.gov, 2021). Because of the ease with which the COVID-19 virus spread, it was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2021). That declaration had the potential to touch the lives of everyone on the planet. In the United States, this led to states mandating and enforcing stay-at-home orders, as well as the wearing of protective face masks, both of which had major impacts on education and the economy. In Pennsylvania, this would lead to a statewide shutdown of all non-essential businesses and locations, including schools and universities.

On February 26, 2020, Pennsylvania State Health Department Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine held a press conference during which she discussed COVID-19 with the public for the first time. In the press conference it was shared, COVID appeared to be more communicable and led to more fatalities than influenza . At the time this statement was made, only 57 people in the United States had tested positive for COVID-19 and there had been no fatalities.

On March 6, 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Pennsylvania. By March 10, 2020, nine school districts throughout the state canceled classes temporarily and the public was introduced to the term *community spread*. Community spread occurs when an illness cannot be traced back to any one particular individual, but is attributed to being widely spread in public spaces (Levy 2021). Community events and

public gatherings throughout Pennsylvania were canceled as the virus proliferated. While canceling events seemed like an extreme measure, it soon became commonplace.

In a bold move, on March 13, 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) mandated that all Pennsylvania Schools close immediately due to the COVID-19 virus (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). On that Friday afternoon, approximately 1.7 million Pennsylvania students were sent home under the PDE directive to districts that schools would be closed for at least two weeks. Staff and students did not know for sure when they would return to school or how education would be structured in the interim. These were unprecedented times that would require school districts to take immediate action on how to provide education to their students while managing faculty and staff employment agreements and related concerns. Additionally, parents and guardians had to quickly make arrangements for the care of their school-age children and navigate the uncertainty around how they would access education for them. School districts frantically developed plans to distribute technology devices and provide internet to families without access, while teachers revised lesson plans to reflect a new virtual reality. Districts without adequate technology resources hastily created packets of printed worksheets and activities for students which were picked up by parents at school doors.

Meanwhile, administrators' email inboxes were rife with questions from parents, caregivers, employees, contracted service providers, and community taxpayers on the plan for moving forward. Decisions were quickly made, with little direction from the PDE, which was receiving guidance from the governor's office and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Administrators had to obtain and communicate answers to many questions, not limited to but including the following:

1. How will students receive education while school buildings are closed?
2. How will teachers provide remote education to students?
3. What technology is available, what is needed, and how will it be paid for?
4. How will school districts educate students with special needs and meet IEP requirements? Are there options, given limited turnaround time and resources?

In addition to these and other concerns from parents, students, and teachers, there were questions regarding the completion of graduation requirements and grade-level advancements. It was clear that school districts had to modify policies, procedures, and strategic plans and implement them quickly.

On March 27, 2020, the governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania signed Act 13 into law. Act 13 amended the Public School Code of 1949 to allow the secretary of education to shut down all school entities until the end of the threat of the pandemic (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). The mandate set forth by the Commonwealth caused schools to rethink how to educate students who were no longer in a brick-and-mortar school setting. Essentially, the entire education system was forced to become virtual.

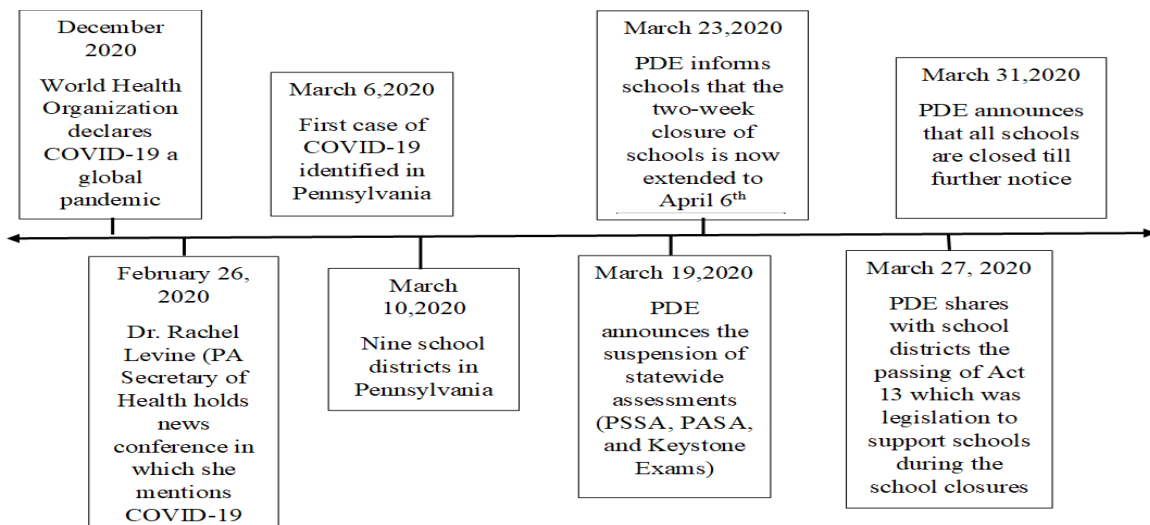
The full ramifications of Pennsylvania schools providing entirely online education to all students during the pandemic are yet to be understood, and it will likely be years before the effects can be adequately measured. Among the challenges that schools faced were providing technology devices to all students (iPads, Chromebooks, laptops, or tablets); ensuring that all students had access to the internet; choosing an online platform to deliver academic content; distributing critical information to students and families; helping teachers learn and adapt to online learning; and, most importantly, addressing the

physical and social and emotional needs of students (Pennsylvania Department of Education 2020). Districts had to make important and impactful decisions in a short amount of time and transform in-person education to virtual education for all of their students. The suspension of in-person instruction at brick-and-mortar school facilities was in effect from March 13, 2020 until at least August 2020, depending upon the district. As the new school year began, some districts began to reinstate in-person learning following the specific guidelines provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The majority of districts operated a version of mixed programming with some students attending in person and some students continuing to learn in a virtual environment.

An important consideration during the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown was attending to the unique needs of students eligible for special education services (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). In the midst of all other challenges, districts had a legal and ethical obligation to determine how they were going to provide programming that met the requirements established in the students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and if the programming met the statute of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Education provided guidelines for schools and established the concept of "good faith effort," which mandated that districts document efforts to ensure that they were providing the best possible educational programming for their students receiving special education services.

Figure 1 illustrates how rapidly schools in Pennsylvania had to adapt from providing in-person instruction to fully providing academic services virtually. Educators

Figure 1

Timeline of Events Leading Up to PDE Mandated COVID-19 School Shutdown

throughout Pennsylvania transitioned from teaching in person to teaching virtually within the timespan of a month. Throughout the Commonwealth, school district administrators had to completely transform the face of instruction for their teachers and students while managing how they were going to address special education requirements, fund necessary technology and support services, and provide for the emotional and physical wellbeing of their students and staff during a global pandemic. The world of education changed rapidly while the needs of the students and staff increased commensurately.

Statement of the Problem

School closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory shutdown caused teachers to quickly transition from in-person instructors implementing curriculum and instruction in physical classrooms and buildings, utilizing physical learning materials, to teachers working from their homes and teaching in a virtual environment, providing online education to students who, along with their families, were also learning

to navigate virtual learning. Students had to adjust to new routines and schedules and adapt to a new learning modality. This would be an added challenge for students with special needs and for the special education teachers who taught them. Special education teachers' self-efficacy related to their ability to provide the necessary academic and behavioral program in the virtual learning environment would be vital to addressing these challenges.

Special education teachers are responsible for numerous tasks and functions that are a part of their everyday duties. Washburn-Moses (2005) examined the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers and compiled the following list: a) managing student behavior; b) completing required paperwork; c) working with general education teachers; d) consulting/developing education plans for students on caseload; e) making accommodations/adaptations; f) teaching core curriculum/subjects; h) working with administration; i) co-teaching; j) working with related service providers; k) working with parents; l) teaching functional/vocational skills; m) working with community agencies/outside supports; and n) acting as advocates for their students. This list accurately describes the typical workload of special education teachers across the Commonwealth. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown, this teacher workload pivoted to a virtual environment. Special education teachers learned to balance their responsibilities while effectively navigating the virtual learning environment as school districts moved from in-person to online instruction. In addition, special education teachers had a responsibility to ensure that their students were receiving the most appropriate education possible, given their particular academic and behavioral needs.

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and mandatory school closings has not yet been fully measured. Schools across Pennsylvania continue to assess students to ascertain the level of regression and recoupment issues that students, especially those with special needs, may have (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). This has resulted in discussions of compensatory services to assist students in recouping skills that may have been lost. Schools must determine if they are required to provide compensatory services, what the services should look like, and how they should be provided. The Pennsylvania Department of Education has provided guidance to school districts on factors and data that need to be considered when determining COVID-19 Compensatory Services (CCS). The PDE also advised that CCS should be calculated by IEP teams based on the following criteria: a) IEP teams should consider if a student's loss of skills/behaviors/lack of progress was related to the districts inability to provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE) while utilizing alternative learning modalities. b) Was the student able to recoup the lost skills/behavior or make meaningful progress after a period of time that was no later than the first three months at the start of the school year? c) If the IEP team determined that CCS services were required, the team would need to determine the extent of CCS services to be provided. d) The IEP team would then need to determine the type and amount of CCS services and how those services would be provided. Additionally, CCS services could not supplant the current IEP and the student needed to remain in the least restrictive environment. This was yet another challenge that special educators navigated along with their numerous other responsibilities.

Special Education

School districts had to next face the challenge of providing education to their students with special needs in a virtual education setting. School districts were tasked to meet the legal requirements established by federal laws stating that students with special needs are to receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) while being educated virtually. School district special education teachers had to work closely with students and their families to make a good faith effort to meet the students' IEP goals as directed by special education law. This added even more pressure on special education teachers as they worked to navigate the change from in-person instruction to virtual instruction. Special education teachers had to establish close family contacts and develop a virtual educational environment that met the academic and behavioral needs of their students.

The disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown could have devastating effects on students with disabilities (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). A significant number of students with disabilities have increased mental health issues, including a lack of socialization (isolation), worry, and anxiety, which may have been magnified by the COVID-19 mandatory shutdown. In the homes of students with disabilities, these shutdowns have necessitated adjustments to well-established routines, forcing parents to take on the role of educator—a role for which most were not trained. As a result, special education teachers have had to support not just the students but the parents as well.

The COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown has had a profound effect on special education teachers. Schuck and Lambert (2020) stated that teachers expressed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about their students and their abilities to provide them with an

appropriate education in the virtual setting. Special education teachers identified the following challenges during the mandatory school shutdown: inequity of support and resources, reliance on at-home support, and changes in the teaching experience (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Teachers identified the following areas as most stressful throughout the shutdown: a) students' lack of internet access; b) attempts to form a community utilizing a virtual platform; and c) the need to suddenly assume a parent figure. With the mandatory school shutdown brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that special education teachers—at an increased rate over their regular education colleagues—had to deal with greater demands in transitioning to virtual environments (Comier et al., 2021). Furthermore, Comier et al. (2021) found that special education teachers in profound numbers were experiencing symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and major depression.

During the mandatory school shutdown, special education teachers had to create ways to ensure that their students' IEPs were being followed, meaning that they were required to do much more than just meet with their students. According to Hirsch et al. (2021), special education teachers were not only expected to establish virtual meetings with their students to provide educational service, but to also monitor the social and behavioral wellbeing of their students, support learners and their families by implementing intervention strategies, educate parents on intervention strategies to help maintain student learning, complete assessments, and collect data to report goal progress on students' IEPs. These factors have also contributed to the mental health issues that are reportedly affecting special education teachers.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher preparation programs have historically focused on preparing educators to teach in an in-person environment. The pandemic forced teachers to instruct in a modality in which they were not trained and did not feel comfortable. The need to provide academic instruction in the online environment surfaced as a challenge that schools and districts faced. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1994) as “people's beliefs about their ability to complete specific tasks” (p.1). The self-efficacy of teachers to navigate and successfully deliver district curriculum and their capabilities to reach designated levels of performance when forced to move from in-person instruction to virtual are vital in understanding the effects COVID-19 mandatory shutdown have had on the education environment. Even with the recent push to ensure that technology is integrated into the classroom, there has been little focus on teacher preparation to teach online (Boltz et al., 2020). Many educators do not have the adequate resources or skills to provide engaging and high-quality online education (Bolz et al., 2020). Chiu (2021) stated that school closures that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly changed the way schools provide education to students, and the urgency with which changes were made has posed substantial challenges to schools.

Research Questions

To address these challenges, the following questions have been explored:

1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' academic goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown?

2. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' behavioral goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown?

Purpose and Significance of the Study

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on everyone in the world and has forever changed our way of being and doing. The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the impact that COVID-19 has had on special education teachers' self-efficacy in meeting student academic and behavioral needs. The study examined the perceptions of teachers related to their ability to provide quality academic programming to students with special needs. In addition to painting a picture of the experiences of those directly affected by the COVID-19 shutdown, this study provided information on what was successful and what were continued challenges. COVID-19 has changed the way we live, how we educate students with disabilities during the pandemic, and how we will educate students with disabilities in the future. Many lessons have been learned as school districts continue to navigate the turbulent waters that resulted from the school shutdown. This study highlights those lessons through the lens of those who were directly immersed in the COVID-19 school shutdown.

Local Context

This study took place in the Pandemic Survivor Private School (PSPS), which is a group of private schools located throughout Pennsylvania that provides academic and behavioral support to approximately 500 students who are diagnosed with autism or emotional disturbance. The central region of the Pandemic Survivor Private School System, where this study took place, includes seven schools. The researcher is currently

the Director of Special Education for one of the schools. For purposive sampling two of the seven schools were utilized and the school where the researcher is a current administrator was not used in this study.

Unlike most private schools, the Pandemic Survivor Private School System contracts with public school districts in providing support and services to students that they refer. Pandemic Survivor Private School System students are and will remain on the rosters of their public school district. The Pandemic Survivor Private School System works with their students, public school district, and families to create an academic and behavioral program that allows the student to successfully engage in learning. The objective of the Pandemic Survivor Private School System is to prepare the student to have the tools necessary to successfully return to their home school district.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study provided a structure to explore the experiences of special education teachers as they were forced to rapidly adjust the way they provided education in the midst of the mandatory COVID-19 statewide school shutdown. The study explored how one private school system responded to the pandemic shutdown and provides insight on the ways their special education teachers engaged students in the virtual environment. Did the special education teachers feel that they had the ability to provide a quality education to their students virtually?

The theoretical framework for this study is social learning theory and the related self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1994). These theories were chosen to provide a structure for understanding how the mandatory school shutdown due to COVID-19 affected teachers' self-efficacy on their ability to meet academic and behavioral needs of their

special education students. Social learning theory states that learning comes through direct experiences (Bandura, 1994). This study examined the learning that occurred for special education teachers through their experiences during the pandemic's mandatory shutdown. According to Bandura (1994), part of social learning theory is what he calls self-efficacy theory, which addresses individuals' beliefs in their ability to complete a task successfully. For this study, the examination of special education teachers' beliefs in their ability to successfully provide academic and behavioral support to their students was the focus.

Limitations

There are potential limitations that could have impacted this phenomenological study. One limitation was related to the nature of qualitative studies based on interviews. The researcher relied on the honest responses of the participants to the interview questions (Creswell, 2014) as they recalled events that occurred over the past two years. The researcher established a rapport with the participants to reflect professionalism and honesty with the goal of establishing trust and encouraging candidness in the responses.

Another potential limitation of this study was the number of participants. Because only five special education teachers were interviewed, the trends found in the study must be interpreted with caution and should not be used to generalize to the larger population (Creswell, 2014).

The potential for researcher bias was another possible limitation to the phenomenological design. Creswell (2014) explains that researchers must reflect on their personal experiences and how those experiences have shaped their beliefs on a particular topic. The researcher was an active participant in the events related to the COVID-19

mandatory school shutdown in his district. His own feeling on his self-efficacy to support students, families, and staff as his school transitioned from in-person instruction to virtual instruction could be perceived as a limitation. Steps were taken to mitigate conscious and unconscious bias.

Background and Role of Researcher

The researcher has been an educator for more than 27 years in public and private schools and has served in the roles of special education teacher, principal, special education supervisor, and director of special education. In his current role, he serves as the special education director for a private school that provides special education services to school districts for students with autism or emotional disturbance and for whom the least restrictive environment may not be the public school.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined to assist the reader in understanding the context of this study.

pandemic – A global epidemic that spreads to more than one continent (World Health Organization, 2021).

community spread – Prevalence of people infected with the virus in an area (community) including some people who are not sure how or where they became infected (World Health Organization, 2021).

continuity of education – The consistent and equitable continuation of education for students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020).

self-efficacy theory – A person's particular set of beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations (Bandura, 1994).

social learning theory – Emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. It considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior (Bandura,1994).

Summary

This study provided a first-hand perspective of special education teachers related to the impact of the Pennsylvania Department of Education COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown. The perceptions of special education teachers documented their feelings of self-efficacy related to their ability to provide an adequate and rigorous online educational program to meet their students' academic and behavioral needs.

Chapter Two

COVID-19 changed the educational environment in ways that have yet to be measured or understood. The overall effects of the mandatory school shutdown and the move from in-person to virtual education for special education students have yet to be fully determined. This chapter examined and reviewed the literature related to special education laws and regulations, special education, and online education. Research associated with teachers' proficiency with technology and the theories of social learning and self-efficacy in relation to teacher competency was also examined. Literature that discussed the challenges that school districts and special education teachers faced throughout the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown were reviewed.

Special Education Laws and Regulations

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) set the standards that guide schools on how individuals with disabilities should receive their education (Osborn & Russo, 2014). IDEA established the concepts of least restrictive environment (LRE) and free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with a disability (Osborne & Russo, 2014). IDEA states that students with special needs will be provided the opportunity to participate in public education in the least restrictive environment that will meet their needs (Osborn & Russo, 2014). Additionally, students will be provided with an individualized education plan (IEP) that puts support into place to allow the student to be successful. According to FAPE, the school district must ensure that special education and related services that include the following are in place: a) education and services are provided at public expense, under public supervision, and without charge; b) programs meet the standards of the state educational agency; c) services include an

appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education; and d) educational services are provided in conformity with the IEP (IDEA, 2004). Furthermore, FAPE includes the following components: a) specially designed instruction; b) appropriate peer group placement; c) placement in the least restrictive environment; d) educational benefit; e) all procedural requirements are met; f) related services are provided as appropriate; g) assistive technology is utilized as needed; and h) all benefits are at the public expense (IDEA, 2004).

IDEA further establishes that no matter what the least restrictive environment is, it will come at no cost and must be appropriate to support the students' needs (Osborn & Russo 2014). These concepts form the basis for all decisions made by multidisciplinary teams (MDT) when reviewing student data and making decisions in relation to eligibility for special education settings and the placement of the student into special education programs (Turnbull et al., 2002). LRE and FAPE do not mean that the student must be educated in the public school. If the public school is not the least restrictive environment, then the student could be placed in one of a variety of environments such as a private special education school. As Osborn and Russo (2014) point out, the financial obligation is borne by the student's home school district. IDEA was developed to ensure that students with special needs are educated in an environment that promotes success and is not overly restrictive (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013).

Because of the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown, school districts had to rapidly determine how to provide FAPE to students with special needs. This was a challenge for all school districts and especially those considered low income (Grant, 2021). Throughout the shutdown, school districts were required to ensure that students

with special needs had access to the same information and programs as non-disabled peers. Additionally, the reduction of essential related services such as physical therapy, speech/language therapy, and occupational therapy presented additional challenges as they had the potential to impact the students' ability to be successful, often resulting in a regression of skills. Furthermore, students that required direct services from a related service provider in person were not able to receive the needed support in their home environment due to the restrictions that were put in place in response to COVID-19, as the related service provider could not access the students' homes.

Online/Virtual Education

Online learning, online education, or virtual education is defined by Rice and Carter (2016) as an educational system in which instruction and content are delivered primarily online. Additionally, they state that all 50 states offer some form of online learning to students in kindergarten to 12th grade. Larwin and Erickson (2016) found that even with the increase in participation in online learning environments by K-12 students, actual academic outcomes have not risen at the same rates. Online education was initially designed to provide educational opportunities to students limited by geographic location or other factors that impacted their ability to attend school in a face-to-face education environment (Larwin & Erickson, 2016). Larwin and Erickson (2016) found that online education allowed for flexibility and provided opportunity for students to participate in academics from nearly any location. Districts that invest in learning management systems (LMS) and commit to making improvements to their technology infrastructures are able to create the necessary tools to support the learning students need to be active participants in the global community (Larwin & Erickson, 2016). Furthermore, online schooling can

provide educational opportunities to students who have limitations that inhibit their ability to attend a traditional brick-and-mortar school (Beck et al., 2014). Beck et al. (2014) also note that online education can allow for better student well-being, especially for students that have disabilities. Beck et al. (2014) found a primary benefit to online education: It challenges the traditional views of what school looks like by advancing the concept of education being more student centered and individualized.

Basham et al. (2016) concluded that online learning looks different from one district to another. Additionally, they discuss two terms that have arisen in describing online learning: asynchronous and synchronous. With asynchronous online education, students receive instruction through the internet and web-based software with little to no face-to-face time with teachers. In contrast, synchronous online learning is defined as learning that is completed in a virtual setting with simultaneous face-to-face interactions with the teacher. According to Basham et al. (2016), online learning can take on the following configurations: a) full-time online learning where students take all academic classes in an online environment; b) blended learning where students learn at least in part through online learning and have control over place, path, and pace, and learning also takes place in a brick-and-mortar setting; c) supplemental online learning where students utilize an online course to supplement another primary learning environment; d) digital learning where students utilize various digital technologies to support learning; and e) personalized learning where the instructional approaches for the student are customized to meet the student's specific needs.

Online Learning and Special Education

Initially, online education was focused on providing programs directed at high-achieving students (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). Online programming has since expanded to include students with a broad range of abilities and has become a viable option for students that are considered at risk (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). Students with disabilities benefit from the flexibility that comes with online classes and the various features of online learning platforms that are suitable in meeting their needs (Cavanaugh et al., 2013). Online education can meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities and can be easily modified as students achieve (Beck et al., 2014). Beck et al. (2014) found that in the online learning environment, teachers can provide educational materials that meet students' varying learning styles and provide immediate feedback to students on their work. Beck et al. (2014) added that educators can accomplish more academically because there is no lunch break, no physical transitions from classroom to classroom, no walking students from the bus or to other places in the building, and no calling roll for attendance. Online learning supports students whose disabilities impact their ability to demonstrate social awareness which, according to Beck et al. (2014), may include protecting students with a disability from being bullied. Larwin and Erickson (2016) assert that online learning has some disadvantages such as loss of apparent verbal cues, potential privacy issues, confidentiality issues, and a high no-show attendance rate from students.

In relation to online learning and special education, it is important to understand that no matter the mode of instructional delivery, the same regulations are still in place for learners. Although online programs provide flexibility for the learner, they are

required to operate under the same laws and regulations as those found in a traditional school (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). Carnahan and Fulton (2013) further point out that because there is no physical teacher on site, it becomes the responsibility of the parent to create a structured learning environment for the student. The parent monitors that the student is “logging in” and the parent is actively participating in the learning process with them. The primary responsibility of ensuring that the student is actively engaged in the online program developed by the school district is shifted to the parent or guardian. The roles are shifted as the parent becomes the primary educator and the teacher is more of a support. This shift becomes more important when working with students with disabilities. If there is a lack of structure and the parent is not able to provide the needed support, it can be detrimental to the success of the student.

Beasley and Beck (2017) identified several factors or *best practices* that teachers should utilize that will help to support parents and their students with special needs in the online education forum. Among these best practices are the following: a) the teacher promotes student success through regular feedback, provides prompt response, and sets clear expectations; b) the teacher is responsive to students with special needs; and c) the teacher uses data and findings from assessments to modify instructional methods and content to guide student learning. Additionally, Beasley and Beck (2017) indicated that the online teacher must teach responsively to meet the needs of their students. The teacher must teach with the students’ needs in mind. This *growth mindset* must be the primary source of how teachers are going to provide academics to students with disabilities in the online learning environment.

Beasley and Beck (2017) also stated that one of the driving aspects of teaching any student, including students with disabilities, is the ability to differentiate all aspects of the educational process. This is an important component of the education of students with disabilities and especially students who are working in an online environment. Differentiation in the online environment should involve a) gathering information so that instruction can be tailored to the student's interest, learning profile, and readiness to learn the topic; b) fostering a community of learners; c) providing for flexible grouping; and d) utilizing formative assessments (Beasley & Beck, 2017). Beasley and Beck (2017) also found that in an online learning environment, the content, product, and process were the areas that needed the most differentiation.

However, this researcher identified a specific gap in the literature regarding the academic and behavioral success of special education students instructed in a virtual setting. Larwin and Erickson (2016) concur, noting that little research has been completed on the success of students with special needs in online education. According to Larwin and Erickson (2016), some research has shown that, on average, students perform better if they are participating in a program that is partly or wholly online when compared with students who attend a brick-and-mortar setting. Larwin and Erickson (2016) go on to express that other research shows no noticeable impact made by online learning. These contrasting findings may point to the need for further research to identify specific factors that influence success in both brick-and-mortar and online environments. Online learning requires a strong online instructor presence and good communication with the student, flexibility with assignments and student schedules, student self-discipline to participate in online sessions, and strong support systems (including parent participation) for students

to be successful. Larwin and Erickson (2016) discuss the findings of a study done in Pennsylvania that examined the academic achievement of online students with disabilities. These students, spanning Grades 4 through 12, performed at a significantly lower level than online students without disabilities. In contrast, a study conducted by Englert et al. (2005) discovered that students with disabilities in online learning environments were able to achieve significantly higher than students with disabilities in brick-and-mortar settings (Larwin & Erickson, 2016).

Teacher Competencies in Online Education

With COVID-19, the discussion of technology and the use of technology becomes even more relevant and important. According to Demirok and Baglama (2018), “technology and use of technology in education have become two concepts which cannot be considered separately” (p. 507). With COVID-19, it has become necessary for schools and school districts to rely solely on technology to provide educational services to many of their students. Since March 13, 2020, many Pennsylvania teachers have utilized some form of technology to reach out to their students to continue the education process. Technology usage and teacher self-efficacy with the use of technology have become even more important to student success as school districts continue to deal with the ramifications of the pandemic.

Research has shown that the more competent teachers are with technology the more academic success they will have with their students (Demirok & Baglama 2018; Graham & Pulham,2018). A widely used model that is used for helping teachers to integrate technology into their daily academics is the technological pedagogical content knowledge model or TPACK (Demirok & Baglama 2018; Voithofer et al., 2019). The

TPACK model defines the integration between technology, pedagogy, and knowledge, and the role of this interaction in integrating technology into education (Demirok & Baglama, 2018). Demirok and Baglama (2018) show the following as the essential components for effective “technopedagogical education”:

- Having an understanding of the technology that is being used in instruction.
- Knowing instructional strategies and presentation techniques for teaching certain subjects.
- Knowing students’ knowledge levels and how to use technology in an appropriate way.
- Knowing necessary technologies and materials to enhance learning in explaining the subject.

With COVID-19, the TPACK model and other technology integration models were brought to the forefront. COVID-19 forced teachers and other educators to adopt technology as a singular way to allow students access to academic instruction.

Online instruction requires that educators have specific competencies. Voithofer et al. (2019) have identified competencies in management, pedagogy, assessment, instructional design, technology, improvement, and disposition that will allow educators to implement online instruction more successfully. These competencies, included in a comprehensive list in Appendix A, have been shown to lead to successful learning by students engaged in online learning.

The competencies for online learning and the understanding of TPACK are important to examine and understand when we are discussing the mass move to online instruction and the impact it may have had on student academic success. It should be

noted that the online teaching competencies identified by Voithofer et al. (2019) are similar to competencies demonstrated by successful blended learning educators. Voithofer et al. (2019) define blended educators as those who are integrating technology and traditional education into one learning environment. Because technology has become so integrated into today's classroom, it has become more important to examine these competencies along with technology integration models like TPACK.

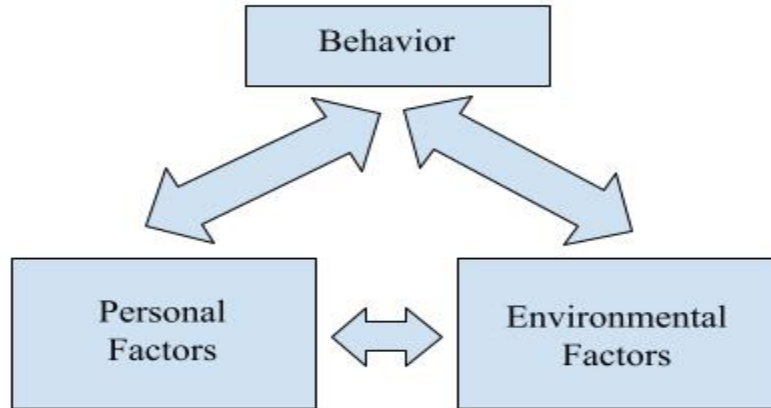
COVID-19 has made it necessary for school districts to take a closer look at the abilities of their teaching staff to utilize technology in ways that allow students to continue to learn and grow in a virtual learning environment. Educators need to develop competencies that lead to success for online learners. The fact remains that most classroom teachers were not fully prepared to become online educators when schools shut down in 2020. For that reason, teachers' self-efficacy in their ability to provide quality online academic programming has become an important issue.

Social Learning Theory/Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's (1994) social learning theory was developed on the concept that learning is affected by three factors: cognitive, behavioral, and environmental (see Figure 2). In contrast to traditional psychological theories which stated that learning came through direct experiences, Bandura (1994) posited that learning occurs by observing other people's behavior and the consequences of that behavior.

Bandura's (1994) social learning theory posits that observational learning is comprised of four aspects: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Attention is defined as the process in which people observe and extract information from ongoing

Figure 2

Conceptual Map of Social Learning Theory

Note. Adapted with permission from "Self-efficacy" by A. Bandura, 1994, *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, 4, p.2.

activities; retention is the process of transforming and restructuring information in the form of rules and conceptions; reproduction is the act of performing actual behavior that was observed; and motivation leads the learner to attention, practice, and retention. Social learning theory points out that people are managers of their own behavior and that observational learning is not an imitative process. Bandura further identified the following three concepts as critical for learning: human agency, self-regulation, and self-efficacy.

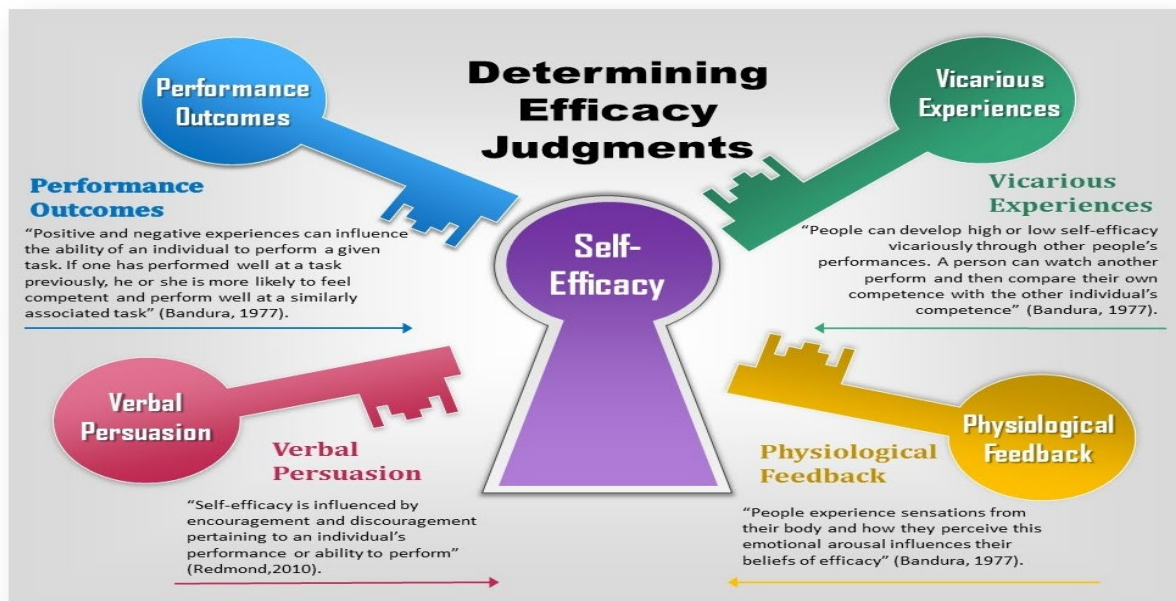
Human agency states that learners make intentional decisions to invest in learning and identifies three modes: personal, proxy, and collective. Self-regulation refers to people's thoughts, feelings, and actions which are planned and adapted in order to obtain

goals. The third concept is self-efficacy from which Bandura (1994) developed the self-efficacy theory.

Self-efficacy theory relates to a person's beliefs in their capability to attain designated types of performances (Bandura, 1994). Figure 3 describes the four areas identified by Bandura in the development of self-efficacy beliefs.

Figure 3

Self-Efficacy Theory



Note. Adapted with permission from "Self-efficacy" by A. Bandura, 1994, *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, 4, p. 2.

Performance outcomes or master experiences are those gained by individuals when they take on a new challenge and are successful with it. These experiences are described by Bandura (1994) as the most influential source of efficacy information. Success builds an individual's belief in their personal efficacy. In contrast, failure undermines these beliefs. Vicarious experiences in self-efficacy are built on seeing other

people in similar positions be successful. Vicarious experiences involve observing other people completing tasks successfully. Social persuasion relates to individuals receiving positive feedback while they are completing complex tasks. Self-efficacy is influenced by encouragement and discouragement. The emotional and physiological well-being of an individual has a strong influence on how they feel about their own personal abilities to complete tasks (Bandura, 1994). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown, all four of these areas had to be addressed by individual teachers and administrators as they worked to manage the change from in-person instruction to virtual instruction.

The competencies that Voithofer et al. (2019) developed for online educators are closely related to teacher self-efficacy. The more competencies teachers hold, the more likely they are to feel capable of performing what is required to be successful virtual educators. In contrast, the fewer competencies teachers hold, the more likely they are to feel less capable of providing successful virtual education.

Furthermore, TPACK also becomes an influencer on teachers' self-efficacy in providing successful virtual instruction (Demirok & Baglama 2018). A teacher who has a strong understanding of technology, knowledge of instructional techniques that support student learning, knowledge of their students' academic levels, and an understanding of the technology and materials that will support learning are going to have a higher self-efficacy in their ability to provide successful virtual instruction. In contrast, teachers who may not have a strong understanding of technology but still know their students and their students' needs may have a low self-efficacy in providing successful virtual instruction. Kwon et al. (2019) share in their research that teachers who feel less competent in the use

of technology will have a lower self-efficacy when it comes to actually integrating and using the technology in instruction. Kwon et al. (2019) introduce the concept of “technophobia,” which is related to the amount of educational technology experience teachers have had. If a teacher does not feel comfortable with the technology they are asked to use, they will not be confident in their ability to teach utilizing the technology tools they are given. It is important to examine teacher self-efficacy in relation to technology because, according to Kwon et al. (2019), teachers will avoid activities when they feel less confident in their ability to implement them. This fact is even more important when telling the story of the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown and the success that students and teachers experienced.

Building Positive Self-Efficacy with Technology

Kwon et al. (2019) stated that when teachers are afforded professional development (PD) that meets their needs, their overall self-efficacy improves. They suggest that teachers should be provided with PD on technology and its usage in supporting the learning of students. Hatlevik (2017) shared that teacher PD in the area of technology should focus on increasing teachers’ digital competence. An increase in digital competence improves teachers’ self-efficacy in using technology as an instructional tool (Barton & Dexter, 2020; Hatlevik, 2017).

Challenges for School District Systems

The mandatory shutdown of schools created many challenges for school district systems. Districts were forced to immediately and rapidly change the way they provided instruction. Millions of Pennsylvania children went from receiving in-person education in brick-and-mortar classrooms to having no access to education at all. Districts had to

quickly develop plans to ensure that all children would continue to receive educational programming. The question of how districts were going to provide educational programming to their students was answered by moving to a virtual platform for education. This decision led to many more challenges that districts had to overcome.

In response, the PDE provided Pennsylvania school districts with basic guidelines for creating a plan to provide *continuity of education*. Continuity of education is defined as the consistent and equitable continuation of education for Pennsylvania students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020). School districts were required to develop continuity of education plans that showed how they would be working to provide a “consistent and equitable” continuation of education for all students.

Emergency Remote Teaching

Tens of millions of students nationwide were no longer attending classes in-person and teachers were expected to quickly and adequately prepare their students, as well as course content, for online instruction (Boltz et al., 2020). Boltz et al. (2020) described the teaching that occurred during the COVID-19 school shutdown as emergency remote teaching. This distinction is important because quality online education requires proactive and intentional planning, teacher education, and time in order for it to be a robust and sustainable learning experience (Boltz et al., 2020). With emergency remote teaching, the necessary proactive, intentional planning; teacher education; and time to prepare were missing. During the COVID-19 shut-down, the University of Texas San Antonio’s Urban Educational Institute conducted a survey of teachers and found that 95% had no previous experience with teaching in an online learning environment (Boltz et al., 2020; Villarreal et al, 2020). The combination of lack

of time and lack of experience made the challenges faced by educators even more burdensome.

Technology

One of the chief challenges districts faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was how to provide access to virtual education to all students. Throughout the Commonwealth, school districts had to rapidly ensure that all of their students had access to the technology they would need in order to participate in virtual education. Although many districts across the Commonwealth had been transitioning over the past few years to providing students with one-to-one access to technology, that was not the case for all districts. Many districts had to rapidly develop plans to purchase and distribute technology to every student, investing large sums of money toward this project. Districts managed technology distribution in various ways including having parents come to the schools where administration brought technology to parents' vehicles or delivering directly to the homes of students. This led to the next challenge that the districts had to address: internet access.

In order to deliver virtual education in a meaningful way, districts had to ensure that all students had access to the internet. Many families throughout the Commonwealth, especially those students living in impoverished areas or in very rural locations, had little or no access to the internet. Districts were forced to become creative in supporting those students, implementing such solutions as setting up internet hotspots throughout the community in community centers, local businesses, or other locations; providing buses with hotspots that traveled to various locations in the community; or providing students

with their own internet hotspot devices. These devices would be yet another expense that districts faced.

Academic

For districts, the next challenge involved selecting the platform that would be used to provide virtual education to their students. Most school districts have learning management systems (LMS) in place. LMSs are typically commercially produced products that are designed to help districts manage student data, compile student information, provide a platform for IEP development, serve as gradebooks, and provide a vehicle for communication. However, most LMSs were not designed to provide a platform for virtual education, so school districts had to quickly research and decide on an online platform that could be utilized to provide an effective virtual education program. These programs needed to be able to provide educators with the necessary tools to deliver an appropriate academic program to their students. Districts also utilized Zoom, a cloud-based virtual communications app, to communicate with staff and to hold meetings with all constituents.

Physical, Social, and Emotional Well-being

School districts also faced challenges related to the physical, social, and emotional well-being of students. While not academically based, these challenges were just as important and demanding. In all school districts throughout the Commonwealth, there are students who qualify for free and reduced lunches based on established eligibility guidelines related to family financial income. In many cases, the breakfasts and lunches provided by schools may be one of the only meals those students receive. Many schools, in cooperation with community organizations, distribute food to families living

in poverty. This has been recognized by both the Department of Education and Commonwealth school districts as an important and necessary service that must be continued. During the pandemic, school districts developed plans on how they were going to safely prepare and distribute food to these students and families. In cooperation with their cafeteria staff, districts created safe environments where food could be processed and lunches created. This allowed students and, in some districts, families to receive lunches and other food items safely and at no cost to the family (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020).

Special Education During COVID-19 Pandemic

At this time, little research has been completed regarding delivery of special education services during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the fact that it began in 2020 and is still ongoing (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Researchers point out that the disruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown could have devastating effects on students with disabilities (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Schuck and Lambert (2020) state that a significant number of students with disabilities have increased mental health issues including a lack of socialization (isolation), worry, and anxiety. The mandatory shutdown in the homes of students with disabilities caused disruption to carefully planned routines, disintegrated support networks, and forced parents to take on the role of educator—with no training. Surveyed parents identified the following as supports they needed during COVID-19: recommendations for dealing with challenging behaviors and strategies to increase motivation for attending school while at home. Schuck and Lambert (2020) also report that even when parents were given support, they still felt it was difficult to balance all of the different responsibilities.

The COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown also had a profound effect on special education teachers. Schuck and Lambert (2020) shared that these teachers expressed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about their students. Their concerns were centered on the safety of their students and access to resources. In their study, Schuck and Lambert (2020) share the experiences of teachers of students with disabilities during the mandatory shutdown and identified three stages that occurred during this time. Stage one involved *making contact*. Teachers reported that in the first two weeks of the shutdown, their main focus was on making contact with students and their families. This contact focused on ensuring that all families felt supported, checking on students' and families' well-being, and surveying families to determine the technology their children would need in order to participate in an online learning environment.

Stage two was described as *establishing routines*. Approximately two weeks after schools shut down, teachers began to provide more support to families. Teachers and families started to utilize the digital learning systems that were incorporated by the school districts. During this stage, Schuck and Lambert (2020) reported that teachers began to help families establish new routines at home and assist parents and students in becoming more comfortable with the digital system. In addition, teachers began establishing their own routines as they familiarized themselves with the digital platforms they would be utilizing to provide instruction.

The third stage identified by Schuck and Lambert (2020) was *transitioning to academics*. This stage was described by the teachers in this study as the most difficult; they expressed feelings of tension between the need to set high expectations for learning and the reality of what could be accomplished in the virtual setting.

Although the study by Schuck and Lambert (2020) is limited because it involved a small sample size (three teachers interviewed), the researchers were able to identify challenges that resulted from the shutdown: inequity of support and resources, reliance on at-home support, and changes in the teaching experience. Teachers shared the areas they found to be most stressful throughout the shutdown: a) students lacking internet access; b) attempts to form a community utilizing a virtual platform; and c) being thrust into the role of being a parent figure.

COVID-19-related Mental Health and Other Concerns for Special Education

Teachers

For several reasons, special education teachers have been identified as a group of educators that have turnover rates approaching 50% in the United States (Cormier et al., 2021). The reasons for the high turnover rates include workload manageability, lack of experience (with various disabilities), and student behaviors related to various disabilities (Comier et al., 2021). With the mandatory school shutdown brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was found that special education teachers (at an increased rate over their regular education peers) had to deal with greater demands in the transition to virtual environments (Comier et al., 2021). Furthermore, Comier et al. (2021) found that special education teachers, in profound numbers, were experiencing symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder and major depression. During the mandatory school shutdown, special education teachers had to develop strategies to ensure that their students' IEPs were being followed. This meant that they were required to do much more than meet with their students. According to Hirsch et al. (2021), while special education teachers were expected to establish virtual meetings with their students to provide educational services,

they were also expected to do the following: monitor the social and behavioral well-being of their students, support learners and their families by implementing intervention strategies, educate parents on intervention strategies to help maintain student learning, complete assessments, and collect data to report on IEP goal progress. These demands have contributed to the mental health issues that are affecting special education teachers.

Hurwitz et al. (2021) also found that special education teachers had several recurring concerns about providing educational services during the pandemic and placed these concerns into four themes.

- Theme 1: Education during a pandemic is an overwhelming challenge.
 - Subtheme 1: Staff difficulties were described using the following terms: frustrating, difficult, struggle, hard, taxing, challenging, and overwhelming.
 - Subtheme 2: Student difficulties were described as being related to the unpredictability of moving to different modes of instruction.
- Theme 2: Serving students in a pandemic requires more innovation and adaptation. The pandemic forced special education teachers to become even more innovative in how they were presenting education material. They had to become creative in designing interventions, working with parents, and engaging students.
- Theme 3: Renewed importance on collaboration with caregivers. With the mandatory school shutdown, caregivers became the educational providers and special education teachers had to help those caregivers learn how to best support their learners. Special education teachers had to direct and educate caregivers on interventions and instruction.

- Theme 4: Contrasting student responses to virtual instruction. It was discovered that some students thrived in virtual instruction. These students were commonly higher functioning, had a greater interest in technology, could interact with their teachers virtually, and were able to be more active participants, due in part to the fact they had less environmental stimuli to negotiate. In contrast, students with more significant needs were found to be struggling to participate virtually. Some of the students' struggles were attributed to lack of support at home, communication difficulties (especially for students who are minimally verbal or non-verbal), and physical difficulties for non-ambulatory students. These factors will also contribute to the mental health issues of special education teachers as we continue to navigate COVID-19.

Summary

The concept of special education teachers' beliefs of their self-efficacy in providing an appropriate and sufficient education to their students is affected by the aforementioned themes. This study examined how special education teachers perceived their self-efficacy in providing virtual instruction in the areas of education and behavior.

Chapter Three

The COVID-19 mandated school shutdown in March of 2020 had significant impacts on the education system and its preparedness to provide an adequate education to students under extreme circumstances. For most students, their mode of instructional delivery went from in-person to remote virtual learning. This study examined the perceptions of self-efficacy of special education teachers on their ability to provide their students with appropriate and adequate academic and behavioral instruction in a virtual environment. This study explored the feelings and emotions of study participants when they were told that schools would immediately close, they would remain closed for the remainder of the 2019 -2020 school year, and their special education students would have to be educated virtually.

The research examined and analyzed the data based on the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' academic goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown?
2. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' behavioral goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown?

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was chosen for this study because it is best suited for seeking understanding of an individual's common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this study shared the lived experience

of serving as special education teachers in an in-person, brick-and-mortar setting. Furthermore, they were forced to quickly shift to provide the same legally required education in a virtual setting. The central phenomenon at the heart of this study was the transition from in-person instruction to virtual instruction in an unexpected, unplanned, and rapid manner.

Phenomenological studies examine the effects of a phenomenon on the subjects that were intimately involved (Moustakas, 1994). In a phenomenological study, the investigator establishes and carries out a series of methods and procedures that are required for an organized, disciplined, and systematic study. Moustakas (1994) identifies those requirements as (a) examination of a topic or question that has autobiographical meanings and values, including social meanings and significance; (b) complete and comprehensive review of literature; (c) procedures for conducting the research; (d) questions that guide the interview process; (e) the conducting and recording of in-depth interviews that are in person, as well as follow up interviews, if needed; and (f) the organization and analysis of the data.

Additionally, Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenological studies utilize questions that (a) seek to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of the phenomenon experienced; (b) seek to uncover the qualitative information in the experience rather than quantitative; (c) engage all of the research participants and their passionate and personal involvement; (d) do not seek to predict or determine causal relationships; and (e) illuminate the phenomenon in comprehensive descriptions, and vivid and accurate renderings.

Creswell (2014) points out that qualitative research approaches utilize inquiry and collection of data in a manner that is sensitive to the individual and locations under study. Creswell (2014) further describes phenomenological studies as being concerned with discovering the common meaning behind a phenomenon as it was lived, experienced, and perceived by several individuals.

By utilizing a phenomenological research design, the researcher developed and explored collective themes from a specific group of individuals who share a common phenomenon. As schools transition to in-person instruction in their physical buildings, it is important to continue to learn from the experiences of educators who worked through the pandemic that caused mandatory school shutdown.

Furthermore, the study used what Seidman (2019) identified as phenomenologically based interviewing. This type of interviewing combines the concepts of life-history interviewing and in-depth interviewing based on the phenomenon being explored. The task of the researcher is to develop questions that are open ended and then build upon and explore the answers that the participants give. Phenomenological interview procedure puts its focus on the lived experiences of the participants and what meanings the participants gain from the experience. Throughout this study, the goal of the researcher was to share the point of view of the special education teachers, therefore striving to gain an understanding of those teachers' point of view (Seidman, 2019). The interview questions utilized in this study are based on the concept that the questions should guide the participants to relive or recount their lived experiences. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher attempted to discover the meaning behind the participants' responses.

Participants and Setting

Setting

The site for this research was part of a system of private schools—The Pandemic Survivor Private Schools (PSPS)—found throughout Pennsylvania. These schools provide academic and behavior support to students who are diagnosed with autism or emotional disturbance. The two schools used in this study are all located within the central region of Pennsylvania.

Access to Research Site

Permission to conduct this study and collect data at this site was granted to the researcher by the vice president of the Pandemic Survivor Private School.

Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. Purposive sampling is a technique that involves the deliberate choice of participants due to the qualities they possess and seeks to find participants that are willing to share information by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Creswell, 2014). In this phenomenological study, the participants were selected because of their shared experiences during the mandatory school shutdown.

The educator participants for this study were drawn from the special education teaching staff of the PSPS. This study specifically sought to gain an understanding of the perceptions of self-efficacy of special education teachers in their ability to provide virtual instruction to special needs students. The criteria for choosing participants included the following:

1. Group one was special education teachers with one or two-years of experience (first-year educators or minimally experienced teachers).
2. Group two was special education teachers with five or more years of experience (more experienced teachers).

The sample of participants was purposefully chosen to provide insight on the perceptions that newer teachers, those with one to two years' experience, had on their self-efficacy in their ability to provide virtual education in comparison to more experienced teachers. This study specifically sought to gain an understanding of the perceptions of self-efficacy of special education teachers in their ability to provide virtual instruction to special needs students.

Instrumentation

This phenomenological study utilized a series of semi-structured with pre-determined and open-ended questions to explore special education teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy in providing rigorous and meaningful academics to their students via a virtual platform. Seidman (2019) states that "at the heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experience through language" (p. 8). This study sought to use an in-depth interview process to provide special education teachers an opportunity to voice their experiences and feelings of self-efficacy during the mandatory school shutdown as a result of the pandemic.

This researcher used interviewing to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of special educators during the pandemic-driven mandatory school shutdown and to make meaning of those experiences (Seidman 2019). As Seidman (2019) emphasized, doing research by utilizing interviews comes from an interest in other

individuals' stories because the stories have worth. Because the researcher lived through the pandemic as a special education administrator, he was interested in the perspective of special education teachers on their self-efficacy in their ability to provide educational services to their students. The goal was to use the information gained to learn and share with others how administrators can support their teachers not only in the extreme circumstances of a pandemic but in all situations. Seidman (2019) explains that if a researcher wants to understand the experiences and the meaning behind the experiences of educators, then interviewing provides an avenue of inquiry. In his work, Seidman (2019) asks the question, "Why choose interviewing?" (p.12). For this researcher, interviewing was a way to gain insight into the educational problems that occurred as a result of the mandatory school shutdown and, specifically, the effects of those shutdown on teachers of special education. The research questions for this study were developed based on the researcher's desire to contribute to the body of literature that examines effects of the mandatory school shutdown on educators. The researcher developed the interview questions and conducted test interviews with colleagues in his doctoral cohort.

Seidman (2019) shares that "interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action" (p. 19) and describes the purpose behind each phase of a three-interview series:

1. The first interview is to establish the context of the participants' experiences.
2. The second interview allows the participants to rebuild the details of their lived experiences.
3. The third interview is used to encourage the participants to develop the meaning of their experiences.

The researcher utilized a modified version of this three-interview series and conducted two interview sessions. This modification better accommodated the teaching and personal schedules of the participants and increased probability of participation. The first interview established the context of the participant's experience and allowed the participant to begin to rebuild their experiences. The second interview provided an opportunity for the participants to continue to rebuild their experiences and encouraged them to build meaning in their experience (see Appendix B).

Validity and Reliability

During phenomenological studies, the researcher is observing what they hear from their participants and then making interpretations of this information. As such, the researcher must remain objective to what they are hearing and avoid bias in order to establish trustworthiness. Groenewald (2004) identifies the importance of *truth-value* in qualitative research. The phenomenological research design helped develop the truthfulness of the study.

Credibility is defined by Creswell (2014) as the extent to which a study is believable and appropriate. To establish credibility in phenomenological research, the researcher must recognize their bias and then develop steps to ensure that bias is addressed throughout the study. For this study, bracketing and using a reflexive diary was used to help mitigate bias. In addition, peer reviewers were used to examine methodology, transcripts, and data analysis. All participants were provided with their transcribed interviews to review in order to ensure that their responses were accurately represented (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Once approval was granted by the Shippensburg University Instructional Review Board, data collection and participant contact began. Contact information for participants was requested through the Pandemic Survivor Private School's special education department. When the contact information was received by the researcher, participants who met the specified requirements were contacted via email to obtain their consent to participate in the study. The special education teachers who returned their signed consent forms then received interview information including informed consent, information on the study, available dates and times, and the researcher's contact information. The purpose of the study and the potential benefits of the study were included within the informed consent.

Interviews were conducted virtually utilizing the Microsoft Teams platform, which allowed them to be recorded for future analysis. Additionally, conducting the interviews virtually allowed the researcher flexibility in scheduling and took into consideration the participants' time. Virtual interviews were conducted at times that worked best for the participants. Interviews took no more than one hour but some were longer, depending on the information that the participant wished to share. Second interviews were conducted within one week of the first. The final step was to explicate the data that was gathered from the interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was what Groenewald (2004) described as data explication: transforming data through interpretation by identifying essential features and relationships. There are five steps to the explication process:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.
4. Summarizing each interview, validating it and, where necessary, modifying it.
5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary. (Groenewald, 2004)

Bracketing and Phenomenological Reduction

Bracketing and phenomenological reduction refer to the researcher deliberately and purposefully being open to the phenomenon as it is and with its own meaning (Groenewald, 2004). Bracketing and reduction are used to ensure that the researcher does not take a particular position in relation to the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Bracketing refers to the separating of the personal preconceptions of the phenomenon to help alleviate bias (Groenewald, 2004). For this study, the researcher repeatedly listened to the interviews that were conducted and then developed a holistic view of the phenomenon in order to emphasize the unique experiences of the participants (Groenewald, 2004).

Delineating Units of Meaning

Delineating units of meaning is described by Creswell (2014) and Groenewald (2004) as the critical part of explicating data that highlight the phenomenon. The researcher used subjective judgment while bracketing presuppositions to avoid making the wrong subjective judgements. Moustakas (1994) describes this step as careful scrutinizing and eliminating redundancies. For this study, the researcher looked for the

number of times particular information (meaning) was mentioned by each participant. The researcher examined the interviews to develop common themes and then derived meaning from the common themes. Transcripts of the interviews were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program and the researcher utilized the program to create codes to transform the complexity of the interviews into a logical and coherent model for understanding. NVivo during the coding process allowed for easier revision to codes and efficient retrieval of data units for reference throughout the analysis process.

The coding process utilizing NVivo involved the creation of codes, which capture similar ideas such as words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs. The researcher read each transcript within NVivo, line by line, identified words or phrases suggesting ideas or units of meaning relevant to the research questions. As each word or phrase was identified, the researcher highlighted it and marked it by assigning a code or name to denote its significance within the context of the study. As the list of assigned code names grew, some codes were reapplied to newly identified words or phrases. This process of assigning new code names or reapplying existing code names to meaningful units of analysis continued until all of the relevant analytical units within each of the transcripts were identified, highlighted, and coded. Finally, after coding was completed for all transcripts, the master code list was reviewed and refined. The research also had a fellow doctoral student review the data and compared the codes that were created. The second doctoral student worked to help ensure that researcher bias was limited and that the codes were accurate prior to reviewing in NVivo. By utilizing a second reviewer more codes and common themes were identified.

Clustering of Units of Meanings to Form Themes

The researcher sought to mitigate bias by utilizing the now-gathered units of meaning to elicit the essence of meaning (Groenewald, 2004). For this part of the data explication, the researcher needed to utilize what Groenewald (2004) describes as *creative insight*. Moustakas (1994) explains that the researcher works to cluster themes by grouping units of meaning together and identifying significant topics or units of significance. The researcher engaged in multiple relistening of recorded interviews and examination of non-redundant units of meaning to develop appropriate meaning for the lived experiences of the participants during the phenomenon of the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown.

Summarize Each Interview; Validate and Modify

The researcher developed a summary incorporating all of the themes and meanings derived from the data to create a holistic view of the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). The goal of the researcher was to create a holistic picture of the shared experiences of the participants in the study. The researcher completed a *validity check* with the participants to determine if the essence of the interviews was correctly captured (Groenewald, 2004).

General and Unique Themes for All the Interviews and Composite Summary

After the transcripts were coded, common themes were identified. The researcher identified the themes (meanings) that are common to most or all of the conducted interviews (Groenewald, 2004) along with the individual variations in the interviews. Next, a composite summary was developed which transformed the participants' everyday expressions into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the

research (Groenewald, 2004). As Groenewald (2004) shares, “Good research is not generated by rigorous data alone, but going beyond the data to develop ideas” (p. 51). For this study, the researcher discovered common themes of participants and analyzed these themes to derive ideas.

Ethical Considerations

An effort was made to ensure that the methods utilized in this study were ethically sound. The methods outlined in this chapter were carefully created to ensure a high degree of trustworthiness. Participants were given information prior to being interviewed in order to minimize risk to the subjects. They were notified of the purpose of the study, including their participant rights (Terrell, 2016). Risks to participants were justifiable and minimized by providing participants with the information needed to determine whether to participate in this study. Prior to beginning the interview process, participants provided written acknowledgment of their willingness to participate by submitting informed consent, a procedure which follows the ethical principles of inflicting no harm and minimizing risks of harm (McMillan, 2016). Participants were advised of their privacy rights and could withdraw their agreement to participate in the research at any time, at which point their interview responses would be eliminated from the study.

The information that was provided to participants detailed an option to withdraw from the study at any time and provided contact information that participants could use if they became uncomfortable during the study. Interview recordings were kept secure as only the researcher had password-protected access to them. Confidentiality of participants was further maintained by the use of pseudonyms—for the teachers as well as the private school system in which the study took place. The researcher gave the

participants an opportunity to review interview transcripts in order to validate the information. All participants were over the age of 18. None were intellectually impaired and all held proper certification, demonstrating their qualifications to effectively perform the positions they currently hold. All participants met the professional criteria outlined in the study.

Summary

This study sought to gain perspective into the emotions of special education teachers and their feelings of self-efficacy in their ability to provide their students with virtual instruction. A phenomenological study was conducted utilizing a two-interview process to gain insight into those feelings and emotions. By utilizing a phenomenological study, the educators were able to share their stories through the use of open-ended interview questions. Meaning and themes were identified using data explication. This study sought to provide current and future educators with insight into the events of the pandemic-caused mandatory school shutdown of 2020 and add to the body of knowledge on the supports and programs that worked and those that did not.

This study provides school administrators with the lived experiences of educators who learned to navigate a new way of providing education to their students. By sharing the stories of the educators involved in the study, the researcher gave school administrators the opportunity to examine what was successful in supporting teachers during the mandatory shutdown and what supports would have been helpful. With this information, both administrators and teachers can be better prepared if any catastrophic event would occur in the future.

Chapter Four

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine special education teachers' feelings of self-efficacy in their ability to develop and implement appropriate academic and behavioral programming for their students with severe special needs while using a virtual platform during the 2020 pandemic shutdown. It is important to share the feelings of those who navigated the unprecedented challenges that occurred during this shutdown in order to understand key learnings that can impact future educational programming.

The views and shared experiences in this study were obtained through two separate in-depth, open-ended interviews. As explained by Seidman (2019), the open-ended interview series allows for an in-depth approach to exploring the meaning of the participant's experience. After interviews were conducted, a list of relevant statements, along with their frequencies, was compiled. Without consideration of prior research and with the use of bracketing to avoid bias, the extracted phrases were connected to the relevant research questions. Additionally, summaries of the interview transcripts were reviewed to ensure a holistic view from each special education teacher. Common experiences among participants were extracted, and these experiences were then grouped into clusters, resulting in common themes.

Participant Identification

The educator participants for this study were drawn from two of the Pandemic Survivor Private Schools in the central Pennsylvania region. This study specifically sought to gain an understanding of special education teachers' perceptions of self-

efficacy in their ability to provide virtual instruction to their students. The following criteria were used to select participants:

1. Group one was comprised of special education teachers with one or two years of experience (first-year educators or minimally experienced teachers).
2. Group two was comprised of special education teachers with five or more years of experience (more experienced teachers).

On March 13th, 2020, all schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were ordered to close their buildings for a minimum of two weeks. This two-week mandated shutdown would then become a mandated suspension of all in-person teaching of students within school facilities for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. This mandated shutdown would have a profound impact on all students but specifically those with special needs and the educators who worked with them. The Pandemic Survivor Private School, which provides educational and behavioral support to students with severe behavior and academic needs, was one such school that was greatly affected. The five teachers that were interviewed for this study shared their experiences of teaching during the shutdown and provided insight into their feelings of self-efficacy in providing a quality online education program for their students. The participants (see Table 1) came from various backgrounds. They had varying years of teaching experience and varying comfort levels with utilizing technology as a means of providing educational support to their students.

Participant Profiles

The participants agreed to participate in this study and share their experiences of teaching students with special needs during the mandated school shutdown. The

Table 1

Participants

Name	Years' Experience	Grade Level (During Shutdown)	Background/Current Role
Ms. J	3	5,6	Ms. J was an upper elementary autistic support teacher in 2019-2020 and is currently a middle school autistic support teacher.
Ms. O	4	11,12,12+	Ms. O was a 9,10, and 11 grade life skills teacher in 2019-2020 and is currently the high-school-to-adult life skills teacher.
Mr. E	5	6, 7, 8	Ms. E was the 6,7,8 grade emotional support teacher in 2019-2020 and is currently the 3,4 grade emotional support teacher.
Mr. J	6	5, 6	Mr. J was the middle school autistic support teacher in 2019-2020 and is now a high school autistic support teacher.
Ms. S	7	K,1,2	Ms. S was the K,1,2, emotional support teacher in 2019-2020 and is currently the special education supervisor.

Note. The table shares a snapshot of the participants in this study. It includes the types of students taught, the years of experience participants had at the time of the pandemic mandatory shutdown, and their roles at the time of the interviews.

researcher selected these five participants because they worked with students having either emotional disabilities or autism and taught in either an elementary, middle school, or high school classroom. The participants also agreed to be interviewed via Microsoft Teams and have their perspectives included in this phenomenological study.

Ms. J.

Ms. J is the middle school autistic support teacher for the Pandemic Survivor Private School. During the mandatory school shutdown, Ms. J. taught a class of eight students in fifth and sixth grade. The class had five male students and three female students. Ms. J. taught her students the general education curriculum based on Pennsylvania state standards while differentiating to meet the instructional level of each student. Ms. J. was in her first year of teaching at the time of the mandatory school shutdown.

Ms. J began teaching as soon as she graduated from college and received her teaching certification. After teaching for one school year, she decided to make a career change: “The actual teaching was great, but the other aspects of the job were a bit chaotic and made me want to go in a different direction.” So, Ms. J. went to nursing school and began to work with pediatric patients. A lot of the pediatric patients she was working with had special needs. Through this experience, Ms. J. felt herself being drawn back to teaching, specifically teaching special education. She began her tenure at the Pandemic Survivor Private School as the intake specialist. The job involved working with school districts to enroll new students into the Pandemic Survivor School District. She noted, “Eventually, I was approached by the special education director about utilizing my teaching degree as classroom teacher and became a middle school autistic support teacher.” Ms. J. had only been teaching for about a month when the mandatory shutdown began.

Ms. J’s. Reflections and Feelings on the Pandemic Mandatory Shutdowns. In her interview, Ms J. shared that, as a result of the pandemic, she feels she has been on a

“journey” and has not yet returned to her life before the pandemic. She said, “I haven’t done my normal routine workouts at the gym, and any self-care stuff that I would normally have done during school went down the drain. And I can’t seem to get back to them.” She added, “I am slowly getting back to normal, but I am still nervous about COVID.”

Ms. J. reflected that her students have been most affected socially: “As we continue to live the new normal, I see that my students have really regressed when it comes to social awareness and understanding of *social surroundings*.” In her opinion, students “kind of lost touch” with regard to appropriate social interactions with peers and adults and “how to act in certain social situations.” They “seemed to have lost the concept of what was okay and not okay.” Ms. J. shared that because we all lived through a shared experience, it has changed how she looks at her students: “I teach with much more patience and understanding when they are struggling with social, behavioral, or academic situations.”

Ms. O.

Ms. O. is employed as the high-school-to-adult life skills teacher at the Pandemic Survivor Private School. At the time of the mandatory school shutdown, Ms. O. was in her second year of teaching. She had six students in her class, two females and four males. The students ranged in age from 17-21 and had a primary diagnosis of autism. Ms. O. teaches functional academics, which can be described as academic skills needed to successfully navigate the world outside of the classroom, in cooperation with transition skills, which are those skills necessary to transition to living and working in the environment outside of the school.

Ms. O. stated that she “has always wanted to be a teacher.” She grew up in a home with a mother who was a teacher and has memories of spending time in her mother’s classroom helping her set up for the new school year. Time spent with her mother and her fellow teachers inspired her to become a teacher. Ms. O. said her decision to become a special education teacher was based on her teenage experience as a volunteer at Scheiber Pediatrics in their “swim buddy” program. As a result of her participation in this program, Ms. O. recalled, “My eyes were opened to the world of special education and the different services that students can receive.” This experience is what guided her to focus her education and career path toward becoming a special education teacher. After graduating from college, Ms. O. spent a year as a long-term substitute in a high school special education classroom. This position solidified her choice to become a special education teacher. The following year she began teaching at the Pandemic Survivor Private School. Ms. O. shared that her current work is the type of job that she had been aspiring to since she first considered a career in special education. During Ms. O.’s second year of teaching at the Pandemic Survivor Private School, the pandemic and mandatory shutdown occurred.

Ms. O.’s Reflections and Feelings on the Pandemic Mandatory Shutdowns.

When asked how COVID-19 has affected her personally, Ms. O. had several insights to share: “When the COVID stuff started, I was pregnant with my first child, and it was very scary not knowing what would happen if I did get COVID.” Then her worst-case scenario happened: Ms. O. tested positive for COVID-19: “I lost my sense of smell and taste and the fear for my baby was tremendous.” She also added that not being able to see and spend time with her family was hard to deal with. Like many families across the world,

the pandemic took away family gatherings and events. For Ms. O, that included a gender reveal for her son, baby showers, and visits from family members to see her newborn child. Ms. O. discussed how the use of FaceTime and Zoom became extremely important in celebrating family events. She explained that she was still able to hold a gender reveal with her family, but it was done online. Ms. O. described it as a “blessing” because more people were able to join online than they could have accommodated at an in-person event.

Ms. O. shared that at the time of the pandemic mandatory shutdown, she was teaching a life skills class to high school aged students diagnosed with autism. She explained that the students were at multiple levels academically, and some were non-verbal. When she fully realized that schools were not going to reopen, her first thought was that her students still “needed to learn.” She explained that it was “basically impossible for her students to utilize technology as a learning tool.” One parent utilized her cell phone to have her child participate in any educational activities. She also shared that one student would physically attack his parents, engage in self-injurious behaviors, and hit or throw the computer anytime his parents would try to get him to use the computer for educational purposes. Ms. O. stated that she “knew that the quality of education that her students were getting at home was just not what they could get in the classroom.”

Ms. O. said that one good thing that came out of the school closures was that her students could practice a lot of life skills around their house, particularly those that they would need to live independently once they graduated. Ms. O. realized that it was a struggle for the parents of her students. She related that when she called parents to offer

support to them, she spent most of the time listening to them recount their frustrations, telling her how challenging it was for them to keep their child on schedule and maintain a consistent routine. The adjustment that stemmed from transitioning from attending school daily to not attending school at all was very difficult because “my students thrive on routine and doing school at home messed them up.” According to Ms. O., students understood that when they were at school, the expectation was for them to do academic and functional tasks; but they did not want to do school at home. Home was a place where they could relax from “doing school,” but that all changed. As a result, Ms. O. noticed a waning in skill usage in her students. She saw regression in their ability to follow routines, listen to the teacher, and behave respectfully, and there was an increase in work-refusal behaviors. Because most of the students did not have adequate support at home and did not adhere to routines, there was a resultant impact on their learning. Now that students are physically back in school, Ms. O. shared that she is working hard to re-instill the skills.

Many of her students had only a couple of years of school left before graduating. Ms. O. pointed out that it was important for them to understand the importance of serving the community and getting along with others in the community. COVID took away the ability for her students to be out in the community, causing them to be “stuck at home, not interacting with other people, not using their social skills.” This is how COVID affected her students; they could not continue to develop the skills that would allow them to be successful participants in their communities.

Overall, Ms. O.’s feeling when she learned that school would be closed for the remainder of the year was sadness and fear:

You are more than halfway through the year and doing great. You are doing everything that you should be doing. You are seeing progress with the kids and then you learn you are not going to see any of them in-person for a while. And you don't know when you would see the kids again. I was nervous for the kids. And I was very sad because I thrive around my students, and because my students struggle with attending to technology, I could not even see them for a moment. I felt lonely and really missed seeing them in-person.

Ms. E.

Ms. E. is the current third, fourth, and fifth grade autistic support teacher for the Pandemic Survivor Private School. At the time of the pandemic mandatory school shutdown, she taught sixth, seventh, and eighth grade autistic support. Her class consisted of eight students, seven male students and one female student.

Ms. E. became a special educator because her younger brother was diagnosed with autism when she was fourteen: "So, in my house, I would see my brother have significant behaviors including head banging, hitting things and people, and destroying things." Her brother received early intervention services and he would do well for a significant period of time, but then teachers would change, or service providers would change, and he would regress: "Seeing the needs my brother had and the need for a consistent person that he needed exposed me to special education. I wanted to become that stable and consistent person that students with autism need." Ms. E. started her teaching career at the Pandemic Survivor Private School and at the time of the interview was in her fourth year of teaching.

Ms. E.'s Reflections and Feelings on the Pandemic Mandatory Shutdowns.

When the COVID-19 mandatory shutdown occurred, Ms. E. described it as “not fun.”: “I like to go places, do things, and be around people and I couldn’t do that. Life became very restricted.” Ms. E. shared that her daughter was very young and could sense that something was wrong, but her parents did not want to scare her: “My daughter noticed that things were different, but it was hard to explain to her what was going on. It was hard explaining why I was home, and she was not going to daycare every day.” Ms. E. stated that if it was hard for her, she could only imagine the struggle that her students and their families were experiencing:

I know for some students the classroom can be a safe space, so we took it away for what we imagined was a couple of weeks and then it ended up being for the year. It caused a lot of anxiety for my students.

Ms. E. went on to explain that her students attend the Pandemic Survivor Public School because they need the support that could be provided in the building and the classroom: “Our students are in our school because they need the support that can be provided to them in a classroom but could not be provided over a computer.” For Ms. E., the ability to physically interact with her students inhibited her ability to effectively instruct them:

In class, I ask the class to get started for the day and can place myself physically in a way to prompt students to get started or move to various areas in the room to point at reminders and visual support. I could not do those same things with students on a computer.

In her opinion the mandatory shutdown negatively impacted the students she had and is currently working with, causing them to be academically below grade level:

The young students who were in kindergarten and first grade missed out on key foundational reading and math skills and now are in second grade and third grade and are expected to complete second grade and third grade academics but lack the foundational skills to be successful.

When Ms. E. reflected on learning about the school closing, she stated it was both good and bad:

I was pregnant at the time, so I was very worried about the illness going around. I had to go to doctor's appointments by myself; my husband could not be with me. It was a little scary but being super pregnant and not having to deal with pregnancy symptoms while trying to teach in a classroom was good. It kind of made that part of my life easier.

She added, "Learning a new way to teach and provide academics was tough."

Mr. J.

Mr. J. is currently the high school autistic support teacher. At the time of the mandatory school shutdown, he was teaching a middle school autistic support class of six male students in seventh and eighth grade. Mr. J. taught the general education curriculum based on the Pennsylvania state standards and was in his fourth year of teaching at the time of the mandatory school shutdown.

Mr. J. had not planned to be an educator. He entered the military directly after high school and served tours in Iraq. Once he completed his service in the military, he was looking for direction: "I didn't always think highly of myself and never thought that I could attend college." As Mr. J. searched for his next step, his wife encouraged him to look at attending college: "I started to attend classes and started to lean towards

education. My desire grew to become a teacher and that led to special education and my current position at Pandemic Survivor Private School.”

Mr. J.’s Reflections and Feelings on the Pandemic Mandatory Shutdowns.

Mr. J. described that COVID-19 changed everything for him and his family. It affected the way that families did everything, “from making appointments to getting groceries, everything changed.” Mr. J. shared that it changed how his family reacted to things: “My family was much more emotional and had emotional reactions to everything.” For Mr. J., COVID-19 helped him to think about things—like communication with others—from a different perspective: “COVID-19 led me to think more about technology and how it was going to be a tool to keep us connected.” For Mr. J., the more we became reliant on technology to support our daily lives, the more he wanted to learn about and explore it: “COVID-19 played a role in my decision to pursue further education in using technology in education.” COVID-19 has changed how Mr. J. teaches his students as he continues to use technology as a teaching tool in his classroom.

COVID-19 had a tremendous influence on how his students with autism communicated: “My students communicated a lot already through online gaming and through social media.” Mr. J. explained that one of his students shared that he was able to still interact with a student who no longer attends the Pandemic Survivor Private School though playing an online game. But Mr. J. felt that COVID-19 was a detriment to his students because they could not learn and practice the social skills they would need to appropriately interact with others (physically): “Even though my students don’t always need physical touch, they need to learn the social cues and body language of others in order to successfully maneuver through social situations. It was hard to teach this

virtually, very hard.” Mr. J. shared that “eighty percent of communication is nonverbal and, with people wearing masks, it became hard for kids with autism to pick up on those nonverbal cues.”

Mr. J. discussed that COVID-19 has made him more “technology oriented” and he “really thought about technology and what I could use and what would work in my classroom.” As the world becomes more digital, it became essential for Mr. J. to try to prepare his students for a world where “they are not filling out forms, but are e-signing documents, completing digital forms, and things like that.” He went on to discuss how experiencing the pandemic as a teacher influenced him to be more mindful of the changes that COVID-19 has caused in relation to how we utilize technology. He added that he is using these new technological strategies in his classroom and preparing his students for the “flat world” they will be entering as adults.

Ms. S.

Ms. S. is currently the special education supervisor for the Pandemic Survivor Private School. At the time of the mandatory school shutdown, Ms. S. taught a kindergarten through second grade emotional support class of six male students. Ms. S. taught the general education curriculum based on Pennsylvania state standards, with appropriate adaptations and accommodations for her students. Ms. S. was in her fifth year of teaching at the time of the mandatory school shutdown.

Ms. S. began her teaching career as an educator in Japan: “I worked in Japan because I was looking for a challenge and felt that Japan would be more challenging than Europe where I could speak the language.” When she returned to the United States, she

was searching for a teaching position that would be challenging. I was working in an ice cream shop because I needed money while looking for a job and met a person that was a special education supervisor for the Pandemic Survivor Private School. He literally walked into the ice cream shop, heard I was a special education teacher, and asked me if I wanted to teach at his school.

Ms. S. stated that she said, “Yes,” and was interviewed and hired as a teacher.

Ms. S.’s Reflections and Feelings on the Pandemic Mandatory Shutdowns.

Ms. S. shared that she did not really know how much COVID affected her personally until she was able to return to doing things that had previously not been allowed:

For me, when I was in the midst of the pandemic, I did what I had to and had accepted it as the new normal. Then I attended an event where I was mingling with others, and it was just special. This is what it was like before COVID and I felt emotions that I had not had before.

Ms. S. stated that she “took COVID in stride and managed it to the best of my ability” then went on to express that while she thought she personally coped fairly well with the pandemic, she did have concerns for her students:

I was wondering what gaps in their learning were being created, or how far behind were they going to fall. I found myself struggling with what could have been. During the pandemic mandatory shutdown, I was teaching students with emotional disorders in second and third grade. They were like the babies back then. They were the little guys. I remember thinking, “These guys are already behind,” and now I found myself wondering how they are going to succeed being already behind and now COVID.

Ms. S. shared that her primary concern was for her students and how they were going to participate in this new academic setting.

Ms. S. stated her belief that when parents made sure their children were logged in at their scheduled time and completing their assigned work utilizing the Microsoft Team platform, those students were successful: “I was able to consistently progress monitor with one student and have good conversations with his mom. But that was one parent out of eight.” Ms. S. said she did not hear from some of her other students. Living situations changed for them or she was unable to contact the parent, no matter how hard she tried. Ms. S. would email, call, and try to set up virtual meetings but did not get a response: “Utilizing the Teams platform, I could post work and set class meeting dates and times but could not engage the students who would not participate.” Ms. S. described these students as completely isolated from school services and any type of consultant support. Occasionally, Ms. S. would hear from a group of students who would periodically attend a scheduled class time or complete a posted assignment.

Throughout the shutdown Ms. S. stated that all her students struggled: “I had a student who would have terrible nightmares and one who seemed very depressed. [It] came out in the way he wrote answers to prompts or participated in discussions.” Ms. S. shared that she felt helpless:

If they would have been able to engage with the virtual platform then I could have supported them. But they couldn’t engage due to lack of parent support, or they were engaged in behaviors and did not have a big investment in school. I just needed them to get on the computer and work so I could help them.

“In contrast,” Ms. S. continued, “when we started back to in-person school, some parents elected to keep their student home. These parents who elected to keep their students at home were engaged and invested and ensured that their child participated.” Ms. S. shared that she was able to talk to these students via the phone or through Teams. She could set assignments and students completed them. She was able to see some students for six hours a day:

It was the polar opposite of the experience that I had during the shutdown.

During the pandemic, I did not feel like I was teaching, I was just sending homework that did not get completed, and trying to touch base with families, but not teaching.

Throughout the first interviews, participants shared their open and frank feelings on the pandemic mandatory shutdown. They discussed their fears and concerns for their own families and for their students and their students' families. They also shared what they learned about navigating the new way that we have had to live with COVID and explained how they had to adjust to teaching in a new way. These first interviews set the stage for the more in-depth interviews that were conducted to examine the self-efficacy of the participants in their ability to provide an appropriate academic program to their students with special needs.

Data Analysis and Coding

Through the use of Microsoft Teams software, the researcher was able to record each interview and produce transcribed files. Prior to formatting these files and uploading them to the NVivo software program for coding, the researcher repeatedly reviewed and relistened to each audio recording. This allowed the researcher to edit the transcripts,

reflect on the responses provided by the participants, and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. Additional notes were taken and more observations were made prior to coding. The research also had a fellow doctoral student review the data and compared the codes that were created. The second doctoral student worked to help ensure that researcher bias was limited and that the codes were accurate prior to reviewing in NVivo. By utilizing a second reviewer more codes and common themes were identified.

According to Creswell (2014), “Coding is the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way” (p. 156). Coding is part of phenomenological reduction, which Moustakas (1994) describes as long and detailed. To facilitate the coding process, NVivo software was used to identify and highlight similar terms, phrases, and ideas from which common themes emerged.

Emerging Themes from the Data

Interviews were conducted to analyze the feelings of self-efficacy that special education teachers experienced regarding their ability to provide effective behavior and academic support to students with autism and emotional disabilities. Through the explication process, themes were extracted without the consideration of prior research, and researcher bias was mitigated through the use of bracketing. Extracting phrases from interviews that were connected to the research questions was the first step. Then, reviews of the interviews were conducted to ensure a holistic view from each participant, and common experiences among the participants were extracted. From this process, four main themes emerged.

1. At the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown, there were barriers and emotions that special education teachers had to process in order for them to provide an adequate educational program for their students.
2. Administrative support and successful communication were essential for successful student participation in virtual educational programming.
3. Teachers' perceptions of their ability to provide an adequate educational program to their students varied from feeling like they could not provide an adequate educational program to feeling like they could provide an adequate academic program as the pandemic mandatory shutdown continued.
4. Teachers' feelings of self-efficacy changed from negative to positive throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdown.

Theme 1: At the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown, there were barriers and emotions that special education teachers had to process in order for them to provide an adequate educational program for their students.

In the story told by each participant, feelings of anxiety—directly or indirectly caused by the mandatory shutdown—were expressed. These feelings included sadness, depression, fear, worry, frustration, confusion, being overwhelmed, and chaos. Ms. O. described the beginning of the mandatory shutdown: “It felt as if a storm was rolling by, with preparing work for students that had to be mailed home and providing technology to students, and then figuring out who can and can’t use technology. It was chaotic.” Mr. J. shared, “As news of the shutdown came suddenly, I felt thrust into a virtual environment that I was not prepared for.” The feelings of anxiety were not just for the teachers themselves but also for the families of the students they taught. Ms. J. expressed

concern for her students and their families: “I couldn’t help but reach out to the families of the students in my classroom. I was concerned for how they were handling the change in routine and wanted to know they were all safe.” This was common among all the participants who needed to know that their students and their students’ families were safe and doing well.

Ms. E shared the following:

It was good and bad because I was pregnant at the time. So, I think that being pregnant when a sickness is going around definitely is something that's on your mind. I know that when I had my doctor's appointments it was very different because my husband was not allowed to come to the appointment, which was very emotional. And it definitely was a little scary, not so much because I was worried about COVID itself, but being pregnant and not knowing how COVID could affect me and my unborn baby.

Ms. O. also shared her emotions and feelings:

It was very lonely and not knowing if I could go out into public or go grocery shopping or to see my parents because I didn't want to get anyone else sick—it was just very scary. It was a scary time.

Subtheme 1: Barriers Related to Emotions. Another barrier that had to be worked through was related to the emotions and behaviors that were displayed by both the special education teachers and their students. Throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdown, the participants in this study shared that they had a variety of emotions in relation to their professional and personal lives. The participants shared that their students also had issues with emotions and behaviors.

A behavior that was identified by Ms. J. was cyberbullying. She described the behavior that she had to deal with: “I do think when you have older students it does get really difficult, like cyber bullying that takes place. And just all these different social skills. You don't realize it's going to take place in your learning environment.” This behavior was one that Ms. J. had to navigate in order to ensure that her students were receiving the best academic programming. Ms. J. went on to explain that she developed lessons focused on cyber bullying and brought administration into her virtual classes to discuss the behavior. Ms. J.’s ability to address cyberbullying helped her students to have appropriate online social skills. This speaks to the importance of communication during the mandatory shutdown—a theme that will be addressed later in this chapter.

Ms. O. pointed out that many times when she would attempt to have her students engage with technology, they would exhibit negative behaviors. These behaviors could be intense and at times even dangerous. Her students would yell, hit, or throw objects when caregivers tried to get them to attend school virtually. Ms. S. shared that her students with emotional support needs would not attend classes, or would log on to the lesson but then not stay on camera or in the room. The students who did attend classes shared their fears and worries about what was happening throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdown.

Ms. J. felt that her students were most affected socially: “As we continue to live the new normal, I see that my students have really regressed when it comes to social awareness and understanding of *social surroundings*.” In her opinion, students “kind of lost touch” with regard to appropriate social interactions with peers and adults and “how to act in certain social situations.” They “seemed to have lost the concept of what was

okay and not okay.” Ms. J. shared discussions she had with her students about the changes and adjustments that had to be made to how we were living then and in the future. Ms. S described the emotional issues that some of her students experienced: “I had a student who would have terrible nightmares and one who seemed very depressed. [It] came out in the way he wrote answers to prompts or participated in discussions.” Ms. S expressed that she felt helpless:

If they would have been able to engage with the virtual platform then I could have supported them. But they couldn’t engage due to lack of parent support, or they were engaged in behaviors and did not have a big investment in school. I just needed them to get on the computer and work so I could help them.

Subtheme 2: Technology Barriers. There were barriers related to technology that had to be overcome in order to allow the teacher participants to provide academic programming to their students. Ms. O. shared,

So firstly, I remember the school reaching out and asking if anyone needed technology for their homes. I remember making phone calls every day and sending so many emails. Trying to set up times to have Zoom meetings with my students and their parents.

This statement identifies technology needs, setting up class/meeting times, and establishing communication with families as barriers that had to be overcome.

Ms. J. mentioned another barrier for her students: They needed in-person learning experiences, including hands-on learning, that were difficult to provide virtually: “You know, they’re being taught through a computer versus in person where I can be more hands on and help them.” Ms. J. also shared, “When we learned we would be providing

virtual instruction, I couldn't help but worry about the students I knew had no access to WiFi, internet, or even a device to use at home." Ms. S. discussed that the students were missing essential support that they had been receiving at school: "They were completely isolated from school services or any kind of consultative support. These supports included related services [speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and behavioral support services]." Ms. S. pointed out that getting students engaged in virtual learning was yet another barrier:

They just weren't able to engage with it. I think it would have been good for them because I was able to give them one-on-one support, but because they weren't able to get online or were engaged in behaviors or did not have a big investment in school, they were unable to engage in the virtual learning environment, and I felt that I couldn't help them.

Theme 2: Administrative support and successful communication was essential for successful student participation in virtual educational programming.

Communication was identified by each participant as the key factor essential to student success throughout the shutdown. Ms. J. described establishing communication with her students and their families as necessary: "I couldn't help but reach out to the families of the students in my classroom. I was concerned for how they were handling the change in routine and wanted to know they were all safe." Communication for the teachers became a daily occurrence. Whether it was just check-in phone calls or Microsoft Team meetings, teachers were continuously working to communicate with the students and families. Ms. O. shared what was echoed by the other participants: "I remember making phone calls every day and sending so many emails." The overall

purpose of the phone calls and emails was to check on the welfare of students and their families, set up times when students could meet with teachers online, and help families establish new routines. Communication became essential and the teachers were the main source of contact with the families of the Pandemic Survivor School District. As Ms. S. mentioned, her primary concern was her students' wellbeing and their ability to participate in virtual academics. She went on to share that she used emails and phone calls to try to set up meeting times for her students and their parents. When teachers were able to establish consistent meeting times, they could teach lessons, progress monitor, and have supportive conversations with families. But contact with all the families was difficult, and Ms. S. admitted that she was only able to establish consistent communication with one student.

Another aspect of communication that was discussed by the participants was the need they felt to take on a new role: social worker. Mr. O. stated, "I felt more like a social worker during this time because I spent a lot of time on the phone consoling families and trying to ease the anxiety and stress on their end." The teachers all made it clear that communication with families was essential throughout the time that school buildings were closed.

An interesting point was made by Mr. J. regarding his students' abilities to communicate during the mandatory shutdown: "My students communicate a lot already through online gaming and through social media." This translated to most of his students being able to engage in communication online, as well as engage in online learning. Ms. J. echoed this:

I believe that being in the environment of their homes where they are more comfortable, free from distractions, and the ability to have more freedom in their schedule seemed to alleviate some of the problematic behaviors that occurred in the classroom setting.

She also shared that “they liked being on a video chat, typing answers, and exploring virtual lessons.”

Theme 3: Teachers' perceptions of their ability to provide an adequate educational program to their students varied throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdowns.

The participants in this study collectively felt that they were largely not prepared to fully implement virtual education. They all shared that there was anxiety about how they were going to make virtual instruction work in a short amount of time. The anxiety they felt was driven by their lack of experience providing virtual education to students with special needs as well as the insecurity that their students' families were feeling about how they were going to take on this new way of life for their children. Ms. O. described how chaotic it felt as she was trying to best instruct the students in her class. This included figuring out what would best work for her students' virtual sessions versus packet work, how often her students could meet, when they could meet, and how much online time they could tolerate.

One of the largest issues shared by all of the participants was getting their students to attend and engage in online education. All the participants said that their students were successful when they engaged in online sessions. The issue was the frustration of trying to get the students to attend those sessions. Many of the participants shared that they would have scheduled teaching times throughout the day with only one

or two students attending those sessions. As a result, the participants said they spent a lot of time researching online resources they could utilize to get any type of student engagement. Ms. S. shared that when parents made sure that their children were online at their scheduled time and completing their assigned work, those students were successful. She went on to share that she really did not feel like a teacher during the pandemic: “I was just sending homework that did not get completed and trying to touch base with families, but not teaching.” Mr. J. echoed Ms. S.’s thoughts: “I found myself scrambling to learn as much as I could about digital tools and web-based resources.”

Three out of the five teachers who were interviewed shared that they were not “intimidated” by using technology and providing virtual education. Ms. S described the technology she utilized:

The school provided us with Teams for video calls and N2Y for online instructional materials. I also utilized Freckle, which provided free learning resources during the pandemic. For the most part, I relied on teacher-made instructional videos. Some of my students were unable to access the computer during the day without their families, and therefore did school in the evening. By making videos, I utilized the flipped-classroom approach, where students learned the content on their own time, and I spent my live sessions with them helping them with concepts they had more questions about.

Ms. J. echoed Ms. S. and stated,

I utilized online websites such as Freckle, Prodigy, and Epic to aid in my virtual instruction. I really liked that Epic was able to provide audio books for students that were still learning to read. I loved that prodigy met students on the level of

math they were performing on comfortably. Freckle was great for providing assignments that they complete for ELA, math, and science/social studies. It would grade and show me a report of how they did on the assignment and what they struggled with.

Ms. S. shared,

After a couple of weeks my students and I established a good routine, for the most part, with watching instructional videos and completing the assignments (they got prizes if they watched the videos and found my code words, which helped them actually watch the entire video through), and I still use some of the PowerPoints that I made during the pandemic in the classroom I am in today!

Ms. J. went on to explain what she learned:

I learned that students were more engaged through virtual learning in the sense that they like being on a video chat, typing answers, and exploring some virtual lessons. For some students who need more 1:1 teaching support, I was able to provide that to them throughout the schedule, which was very helpful.

Ms. J. reported that

After a couple of weeks and learning how my students were able to work virtually, I moved to an eight or nine on a scale to 10. I felt more confident in my instructional control, resources, and the virtual instruction I was providing. I was able to make a schedule that worked for everyone and accommodated families needing extra support. I was able to group students with similar needs and provide that differentiated instruction that they needed, especially being virtual. I would say if we shut down again or had to go virtual again, I am fully confident on a

scale of one to ten that I would be a ten. I know exactly how I would manage my time, set my expectations, reach my students, and differentiate instruction. I have learned how to incorporate virtual assignments into my in-person instruction at school, so my students have a general idea of how to maneuver virtual instruction if it happens again.

Mr. J. also was comfortable navigating the virtual education environment:

I spent a great deal of time setting up a virtual class for my students. The logistics of it felt overwhelming, but when I look back, I feel that I handled it well. I found myself scrambling to learn as much as I could about digital tools and web-based resources. Microsoft Teams was not ideal, but it provided a structure to have virtual meetings and a place to post assignments for students.

He also shared,

Reflecting on how everything went during the initial shutdown and teaching through the pandemic, I honestly felt like I did the best I could with what we were given and the time constraints. I do not think I would have done anything different. However, if given another chance, I would utilize many of the digital tools and resources I've learned [about] to create more interactive experiences for my students.

In contrast Ms. O. shared the struggles that they both felt with providing academic programming in the virtual environment:

Those first two weeks were chaotic. It felt like we were watching a storm roll by, with trying to prepare work for the students to take home/mail and getting technology passed out, as well as figuring out who can/can't use technology and

figuring out the best ways to have my students complete work at home without causing behaviors or overwhelming my student's parents. And just to note, that entire school year felt chaotic, crazy, and just not appropriate for my students. I felt so worried that my students were going to fall so behind and any progress with academics and behaviors would be lost if we couldn't figure out a new system that worked for our students.

She also shared that "it is very hard for my students to complete work virtually and they usually end up working on worksheets and life skills/chores at home."

Theme 4: Teachers' feelings of self-efficacy changed throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdown

The fourth theme was the shared perception that participants' feelings of self-efficacy related to their ability to produce an adequate online education for their students increased positively. There was an overall feeling, from the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown until today, that they have become much more prepared to face the challenges of providing an online education that would be engaging and appropriate for their students. Mr. J. stated, "My confidence in myself became stronger and I felt more comfortable in what I was doing." He is now pursuing a master's degree in online education: "I feel like I have a better understanding of how to present online and how to engage with students on a virtual platform to create positive interactions."

Ms. J., who was just starting her teaching career, described her self-efficacy as going from a seven out of 10 to a nine out of 10. Ms. J. described how at the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown it was hard to get things started, but after a few weeks, she had established a schedule, had students and parents engaged, and "was able to

group students with similar needs and provide differentiated instruction that my students needed, especially being virtual.” Ms. J. went on to share that she might even be a 10 out of 10 in her ability to provide a quality online education to her students if a shutdown would happen again: “I know how I would manage my time, set my expectations, reach my students, and differentiate instruction.”

Summary

The participants in this study shared their feelings of their self-efficacy in providing an adequate online educational program for their students with special needs. Participants reported that at the start of the pandemic, they did not feel adequately prepared to take on the task that was laid before them. According to participants, it was much more than just getting online and teaching; that they had to take on roles of advisors and counselors to their students and their students’ families. Participants openly shared their personal fears as well as the fears they had for their students. The participants stated that the experience of the mandatory shutdown forced them to work harder than ever before and their feelings of self-efficacy changed. Further discussions of the findings will be provided in Chapter Five, including the improved self-efficacy of the participants and the factors that supported this change.

Chapter Five

The 2020 pandemic mandatory school shutdown had a profound effect on educators, students, and families. The repercussions continue to be realized in schools as we traverse the post-pandemic era. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to share the lived experiences of teachers who provided academic and behavioral support during the pandemic to students who require the services of a specialized private facility to meet their needs.

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings, recommendations, and implications for future research. The discussion of findings includes responses to the research questions and an exploration of themes that emerged during the study.

Through one-to-one interviews, the special education teachers who participated in this study had the opportunity to express their feelings and perceptions in relation to their success in meeting the needs of their students on a virtual platform. These teachers expressed the various fears and anxieties that they felt for themselves personally and for their students and their families. They shared their overwhelming concerns and expectations that arose as it became clear that the mandatory shutdown was going to continue for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Their concerns included the challenge of preparing programming for virtual education, students' access to technology, communication with students and their families, and the safety and wellbeing of the students and their families. These concerns were intertwined with the personal concerns of the participants as their own lives were turned upside down. In an entirely new way, the participants had to learn how to balance the pandemic mandatory shutdown with their lives at home with their own families and determine how they were going to teach their

students in a virtual environment. The participants were candid about their feelings of chaos and uncertainty related to what this new way of living would look like for them personally. While getting last minute phone calls and emails from administration on how virtual education was going to work, they quickly pivoted to create an environment in their home that allowed them to teach. The adjustments that had to be made to personal schedules and the lack of separation from home and work was another area that the participants discussed. All these stressors influenced the participants' feelings of self-efficacy in teaching their students in a virtual environment.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study examined educators' feelings of self-efficacy during the pandemic school shutdown related to their perceived ability to provide educational and behavioral support to students with special needs. Furthermore, this study investigated whether their feelings of self-efficacy were impacted when the shutdown was extended through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' academic goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown?
2. What are the perceptions of special education teachers of their self-efficacy in meeting special education students' behavioral goals in a virtual environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic mandatory school shutdown?

Discussion of Theme 1: At the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown, there were barriers and emotions that special education teachers had to process in order for them to provide an adequate educational program for their students.

Within the first two weeks, all of the participants expressed that there was a lack of positive feelings of self-efficacy in relation to actually providing quality academic and behavior support to their students. The participants shared their feelings of chaos and lack of certainty related to the unknowns of the pandemic and the related mandatory shutdown. The participants discussed the concerns they had for themselves and their families as they had to learn to navigate a new world of isolation and limited contact. Two of the participants were pregnant at the time of the shutdown and shared that it was especially stressful dealing with the unknown of COVID-19 and pregnancy, attending appointments without their spouses, being unable to have baby showers and be with families, and protecting the newborns from COVID. All this happened while getting last minute phone calls and emails from administration on how virtual education was going to work and quickly pivoting to create an environment in their home that allowed them to teach. The adjustments that had to be made to personal schedules and the lack of separation from home and work were additional challenges that the participants discussed. All these stressors influenced the participants' feelings of self-efficacy in teaching their students in a virtual environment.

The participants shared the concerns they had over the various barriers that their students had to face. These barriers came in two forms: emotional (behavioral) and technological. Because the students of the PSPS all have diagnoses of either autism or emotional disability, emotions and behaviors were an issue. Some of the participants

shared the various emotional (behavioral) barriers that they encountered. These included depression, nightmares, work refusal, attendance issues, and inability to attend to technology without a behavior occurring. Ms. S. put it best by saying,

If they would have been able to engage with the virtual platform then I could have supported them. But because they couldn't engage due to lack of parent support, or they were engaged in behaviors and did not have a big investment in school. I just needed them to get on the computer and work so I could help them.

The second barrier was related to the lack of technology that the students had access to and their inability to engage in virtual learning. Early in the pandemic mandatory shutdown, there was a realization by the administration of the PSPS that they needed to know which students had the technology needed to attend a virtual program. The administration, in cooperation with the teachers, quickly made phone calls to all the PSPS students' families to inquire about these technology needs. As a result, it was discovered that several students did not have a device or access to WiFi that would allow them to participate in a virtual academic program. It was also discovered that several families refused to participate in a virtual program. Other families shared that their students would engage in dangerous behavior when encouraged to engage with a device.

The PSPS administration and staff had to find ways to overcome these technology barriers. The solution included providing devices and WiFi hotspots to families who needed them and creating alternative educational materials (learning packets) for those families that refused virtual education or whose students would engage in dangerous behavior when introduced to a device. The PSPS administration depended on the teachers

to create the materials, communicate frequently with the parents, and then developed a system of distributing and collecting work from families. Ms. O. described it like this:

Those first two weeks were chaos. It felt like we were watching a storm roll by, with trying to prepare work for the students to take home/mail and getting technology passed out, as well as figuring out who can/can't use technology and figuring out the best ways to have my students complete work at home without causing behaviors or overwhelming my students' parents.

Discussion of Theme 2: Administrative support and successful communication was essential for successful student participation in virtual educational programming

In relation to theme one and the barriers that were discussed, participants in this study shared how support from the administration and communication with families were necessary to provide successful virtual academic programming. The PSPS administration had daily communication with teachers via phone calls or emails. The participants mentioned that PSPS administration did their best to communicate important information on how virtual education was going to be administered to the students. This communication included details related to families that either had technology or would be receiving technology, delivery of devices and materials, and emotional support for the teachers. Many of the participants expressed appreciation for what the administration was doing throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdowns.

Furthermore, the participants expressed that establishing consistent communication with their students and their students' families was essential for students to successfully engage in the virtual learning environment. The participants shared that regular communication and consistent routines with their students and their students'

families resulted in student success. For many of the participants, the initial communication with students and the students' families was related to the safety and wellbeing of the students. As Ms. J. put it, "I couldn't help but reach out to the families of the students in my classroom. I was concerned for how they were handling the change in routine and wanted to know they were all safe." But beyond communication focused on the well-being of students came the need to establish a consistent routine of daily communication. When the teachers could communicate with their students and their students' families in a consistent fashion, the students were successful in engaging in the online learning platform. For those students who could not engage virtually, consistent communication with the families allowed the teachers to become academic coaches, helping the families to utilize the provided material and programming. This allowed for the majority of the students to participate to the best of their ability in some type of educational programming throughout the mandatory shutdown.

Discussion of Theme 3: Teachers' perceptions of their ability to provide an adequate educational program to their students varied throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdowns.

Initially, the participants in this study shared that they had a negative self-efficacy related to their ability to rapidly provide appropriate academic programming to their students with special needs. They expressed their initial lack of knowledge on utilizing technology to create online learning for their students. This included learning how to navigate the new online learning platform that was chosen by the PSPS administration and discovering online tools could be used within that platform. The teachers also expressed a lack of confidence in engaging students via a computer and through virtual

technology. Ms. O. described her feelings of self-efficacy when she began providing virtual education to her students as being lost and confused: “I did not know where to start to look for resources and help.” Ms. S. also described her self-efficacy at the start of the mandatory shutdown: “I had little confidence with technology prior to the shutdown; I utilized very little technology in the classroom.” This feeling of not having experience using technology as an educational tool was felt by all the participants. They had not utilized technology very much in their classrooms and had never taught utilizing a virtual platform. It appears that the lack of confidence was directly correlated with the lack of experience. Mr. J. put it this way: “I had no experience with it, and I did not know what I was doing.” Ms. E. went on to say, “I’m not sure that I was very confident about what I was doing, and currently, I am not a fan of virtual learning and would much rather do in-person instruction.”

Throughout the interviews and after extrapolating the data, it became evident that the overall self-efficacy of the five special education teachers was low at the start of the pandemic mandatory shutdown. They did not have confidence in their ability to adequately navigate the virtual world and to develop academic programming that would meet the needs of their students. This lack of confidence stemmed from lack of experience in teaching utilizing a virtual platform and an overall lack of experience utilizing technology as an educational tool in the classroom. These feelings of low self-efficacy occurred at the start of the pandemic mandated shutdown; it is important to explore participants’ feelings after several weeks had passed to see if there were any changes.

Discussion of Theme 4: Teachers' feelings of self-efficacy changed throughout the pandemic mandatory shutdown.

The participants all shared that their feelings of self-efficacy moved to a much more positive level after administration provided an online learning platform and after a new routine, new expectations, and regular communication with students and their families were established. All the participants reflected that the longer the shutdown went on, the stronger their self-efficacy became. This, again, was directly related to the experience that the participants had with technology and the virtual educational platform. Ms. S. shared that her ability to provide quality academics to her students improved greatly: "My students and I established a good routine with watching the videos I created and completing assignments that were posted online." Ms. O. echoed this thought:

Being a teacher means being flexible and this required me to be flexible in new and different ways. I now know what works and what doesn't, and I know how to communicate and support my parents so that my students can engage in virtual learning.

All of the participants also stated that support provided by administration helped in improving their self-efficacy. Ms. S. shared, "The administration of the Pandemic Survivor Private School was always available and easy to access, and I never felt that the administration was not doing everything possible to support us." Mr. J. pointed out that "administration and other staff would check in on us and we would check on each other. I was able to stay in contact with colleagues and we just worked through any problems as they came up." The fact that all participants felt their self-efficacy moved to a more positive level may be attributed to a perceived need to adjust to the world around them in

order to ensure that their students were receiving the best educational program. Ms. E. put it this way:

There was not a lot of guidance as to the expectation of virtual learning because it was so new to all that were involved. There was freedom to do what was needed to meet the needs of each student as best as possible.

Limitations

The qualitative research conducted in this study provides insight into how the pandemic mandatory shutdown affected a group of special education teachers and how they had to adapt to teaching students with special needs in a virtual learning environment. Because the study was based on interviewing, the researcher relied on the honest responses of the participants (Creswell, 2014). The researcher sought to establish a rapport of professionalism and honesty with the participants to increase trust. The study specifically examined the feelings of self-efficacy that these educators felt on their ability to provide an appropriate and adequate education program to students with disabilities utilizing a virtual platform. The information that was shared in Chapter Four specifically identified how these educators' feelings of self-efficacy changed as they adapted to the new virtual learning platform and gained more experience utilizing online tools and teaching virtually.

The pandemic mandated school shutdown was an event that no one had experienced before. The complete closing of all school buildings and the halt to all in-person education throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were historic. Because the experience was unprecedented for educators, telling the story of those who lived the

experience is important but specialized to the participants and their individual experiences during the specific time frame studied.

Another limitation of this study was the number of participants and the fact that all are from the same private school system. Because this study utilized purposive sampling, the scope of the study was narrow. It addressed teachers in a specialized private school who teach a specific population of students. Because only five special education teachers were interviewed, the trends found in the study must be interpreted with caution and should not be used to generalize to the larger population (Creswell, 2014). A larger study with more participants from both regular education and special education would tell the story of the pandemic mandatory school shutdown on a grander scale and add to the overall understanding.

Still another limitation in a phenomenological design is the potential for researcher bias. Creswell (2014) explained that researchers must reflect on their personal experiences and how those experiences have shaped their beliefs on a particular topic. For this researcher, the bias could relate to his active participation in the events related to the COVID-19 mandatory school shutdown and his own reflection on his self-efficacy as an administrator to support students, families, and staff as schools transitioned from in-person instruction to virtual instruction. While the researcher used a reflexive diary to mitigate potential bias, the possibility exists. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that he shared the participants' stories and did not bring his own feelings of anxiety and uncertainty that he felt at the time of the pandemic mandatory shutdown. This was done by reflecting on his thoughts with other educators as he reviewed and processed the interviews.

Lastly, the recollections of these five special education teachers may have been affected by the fact that their interviews were conducted approximately two and a half years after the pandemic mandatory shutdown occurred.

Recommendations

The participants all shared that their feelings of self-efficacy increased as the mandatory shutdown continued. They reflected that most of their feelings of low self-efficacy were related to the unknowns; their fears and anxiety in both their private lives and work lives contributed to their feelings of low self-efficacy. The following recommendations are based on the contributing factors that led the participants to express that their feeling of self-efficacy moved to a more positive level. The themes that emerged in Chapter Four resulted in findings that were cross-referenced with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Thus, the following recommendations are intended to help educators who work with students with special needs in a private school setting achieve positive self-efficacy toward their ability to provide appropriate online education to students with special needs.

Experience

The participants expressed that a lot of their anxiety was attributed to a lack of experience in two areas. The first area was technology. The participants indicated that for the most part, technology had not been used as an educational tool in their classrooms. As the participants were forced to engage in utilizing technology, specifically virtual education, they had to find and utilize technology tools that would meet the needs of their students. The more time they spent in finding appropriate technology, the more their feelings of self-efficacy increased. The recommendation for this area is for education

systems to provide professional development to their teachers about online education and online tools that they can utilize in their classroom.

The second area of experience identified by participants as leading to anxiety was teaching via a computer. The participants discussed how they struggled to have students engage online and described how they had to find engaging online tools, create engaging videos, and adjust how they approached students while teaching online. It is recommended that school entities support online learning by investing in online programs that support student engagement, and allow educators to easily set assignments, monitor student engagement, and track student progress. The program should be a tool that can be used both in the classroom and at home.

Establishing Routines and Expectations

The participants indicated that after they were able to establish routines and expectations with their students, their feelings of self-efficacy greatly improved. Part of the anxiety shared by all the participants was related to the initial chaos that came at the start of the mandatory shutdown. Once the participants were able to establish communication with their students' families, and then create a consistent schedule and routine, their confidence levels greatly improved. And as students began to follow the newly established schedules and routines, their behaviors did improve. Several of the participants said that the establishment of routines and expectations was an essential component of being able to provide a successful academic program to their students, both academically and behaviorally. It is recommended that educators ensure they provide sufficient communication with their students' families and include information such as classroom routines, expectations, rules, and schedules. In addition, educators need to

expand their communication regarding guidelines and expectations in the event that there would be a need to move to virtual education. Furthermore, a survey of the technology needs of all students should be distributed so that school entities can be ready to provide technology devices and WiFi access to those who would need it. Also, to support these expectations, teachers should work with students who may be averse to technology on attending to a device for some of their academic programming. Doing this in a controlled environment with available staff to support behaviors could be beneficial in helping the students to be less averse to a technological device.

Administrative Support

Administrative support was indicated by many of the participants as an important component for establishing contact with parents, making certain that students had what they needed, and ensuring that teachers received accurate and appropriate information in a timely manner. It was further indicated that having easy access to administration when concerns arose supported participants' improved feelings of self-efficacy. It is recommended that school entities continue to maintain close communication with all stakeholders through regular communication regarding utilization of online education for situations other than a global pandemic, such extended absences, family vacations during school days, or snow days. It is further recommended that administrators ensure they are well educated on the online education platform that is to be utilized, as well as the available virtual tools, so that adequate professional development and support can be provided to educators.

Implications for Future Research

An important overall issue that was discussed by all of the participants was concern for student regression in both academics and behaviors. Further research in this area would aid in understanding the academic and behavioral regression rates of students with special needs. Future research could include a quantitative study utilizing academic and behavior data. Such studies could have implications for educators and offer guidance in how to provide and adjust instruction, now and in the future.

There are various recommendations for future research on the topic of teachers' self-efficacy and their ability to provide appropriate virtual educational programming to students with disabilities. Future studies should be conducted by practitioners and researchers to help answer the following questions:

1. What types of professional development could be created for all educators that would improve feelings of self-efficacy related to providing virtual academic programming?
2. What are various ways the administration at the district level supported online learning during the pandemic? Were those supports adequate enough to improve educators' feelings of self-efficacy in providing appropriate virtual learning to students?
3. What lessons have been learned from the pandemic mandatory shutdown and the online education system that is currently being utilized? Have these learnings improved teachers' feelings of self-efficacy in utilizing technology to support student learning in their classrooms?

Final Reflection

This qualitative phenomenological study was done with the purpose of examining the feelings of self-efficacy that special education teachers at a private institution experienced during the 2020 pandemic mandatory school shutdown. It was hypothesized by this researcher that feelings of self-efficacy would be low. This appeared to be the case at the start of the shutdown, but through the interview process, the researcher found that levels of self-efficacy greatly improved as the shutdown continued through the remainder of the school year. It was found that, with time and experience, participants' self-efficacy not only increased but continues to be at a high level. This finding is supported by the social learning theory, which states that learning comes through direct experiences (Bandura, 1994). Social learning theory also states that learning is affected by cognitive factors, behavioral factors, and environmental factors. For the participants in this study, all three of these factors came into play as they had to learn to navigate teaching in a virtual environment. Furthermore, participants discussed how confidence in their ability to provide virtual education to their students with special needs increased, a finding that is supported by Bandura's (1994) self-efficacy theory. The longer the participants were immersed in virtual teaching and the more success they experienced, the more their self-efficacy in utilizing a virtual platform increased. Even though not all of the participants were advocates of virtual instruction and virtual instruction may not have been successful with every student, there was a change in feelings of self-efficacy related to their ability to provide an appropriate academic and behavior program in a virtual environment.

The participants shared that the more positive interactions they had with students, student's families, and administration, the more confident they became in their ability to provide appropriate online education. They also shared that as they learned how to personally navigate the world during the pandemic mandatory shutdown, their self-efficacy levels improved. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic mandatory school shutdown, all of these areas had to be addressed by individual teachers and administrators as they worked to manage the change from in-person instruction to virtual instruction.

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Appendix A

Competencies for Successful Online Instruction

<p>Management Competencies: Ability to Communicate via the internet Establishing Expectations Ability to manage behaviors and discipline online Ability to manage online content and resources Strong time management skills including scheduling options for students</p>
<p>Pedagogy Competencies: Ability to be flexible and provide personalization (pacing, learning styles, curriculum) Ability to allow for student collaboration online Knowledge of content Knowledge of pedagogy Ability to foster online discussions Ability to support students online Ensure student-centered learning Ability to create a learning community Ability to motivate students while online Create problem-based learning Foster student creativity Develop instructional interventions</p>
<p>Assessment Competencies: Ability to do general assessment online Ability to manage and utilize data Provide timely feedback Ensure that authentic assessment is utilized Develop opportunities for students to do self-assessments Understand student readiness Develop and utilize formative assessments</p>
<p>Instructional Design Competencies: Curating online learning activities Use universal design and access Create diverse curriculum activities</p>
<p>Technology Competencies: Understanding of general technology Ability to troubleshoot technological issues Understand software use and management Understand and manage Learning Management Systems</p>
<p>Improvement Competencies: Utilizing evaluations Utilizing reflection</p>

Disposition Competencies: Establishing respect Establishing goal setting Maintain transparency Build creativity Establish and maintain a Growth Mindset
Other Competencies: Maintain academic credentials Previous online learning experiences

Adapted with permission from “Factors that influence TPACK adoption by teacher educators in the US” by Voithofer et al., 2019, *Education Tech Research Development*, 67, p. 1431.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

First interview Questions

The researcher has developed questions that will guide the study participants to discuss themselves in light of the phenomenon that they experienced (Seidman, 2019).

These questions seek to discover how the phenomenon impacted their lives.

1. Describe your career path and how it led you to your current role in special education.
2. Describe the impact COVID-19 has had on you personally.
3. Describe the effects COVID-19 has had on the students you teach.
4. Describe how COVID-19 changed how you teach your students.
5. Describe your feelings/emotions when it was shared with you that schools would be closed for the remaining school year.
6. How were you informed of the instructional plans for the mandatory shutdown?

Second Interview Questions

For this study, the purpose of the second interview is to allow the special education teachers participating in the study the opportunity to share and develop their descriptions of the COVID-19 Mandatory School shutdown.

1. Describe the first two weeks of the shutdown as you prepared for virtual instruction?
2. What contact did you have with your students' families during the first two weeks of the pandemic mandatory shut-downs?

3. What type of program/technology did you utilize?
4. What did you learn about providing virtual education to special education students?
5. Given what you've learned, what if anything, would you do differently?
6. What support from the district was helpful?
7. What support would you have liked to have?
8. What new learning, if any, have you brought into the classroom from virtual instruction?
9. What were your feelings of self-efficacy on providing virtual education prior to the mandatory shutdown... after 8 weeks... now?