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TEACHERS' VIEWS OF SITUATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING TEACHING
EFFICACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Social Science

by
Holly Gillespie
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 created many disruptions in the field of education as teachers and administrators navigated the many changing protocols affecting learning environments and pedagogy over the past two years. This thesis examines secondary teachers' perceptions of managing these protocols through their lived experiences while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic through the 2020-2021 school years. Previous research has shown a teacher's sense of self-efficacy is related to both learning situations and teacher performance. However, research exploring the impact COVID-19 has had on teachers and their learning environments is limited. This qualitative exploratory study fills the gap by investigating situational factors in learning environments that influenced participants' sense of teaching-efficacy during the pandemic. The data were collected through nine semi-structured interviews with secondary teachers at a public middle school. Findings show that participants perceived workplace satisfaction and increased teaching-efficacy as dependent on emotional and material administrative support systems. Furthermore, these findings illustrate that successful management of instructional pedagogy and learning outcomes during hybrid learning are influenced by social structures and accountability dynamics within their school. Implications of this study are discussed in relation to: (a) the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching-efficacy and (b) practical and social efforts to advance the understanding of teacher burnout and attrition rates.

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INTRODUCTION

March 2020 ushered in a mass exodus from on-campus learning in favor of distance learning, and with it, myriad challenges for primary and secondary educators. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected the field of education over the past two years. Current United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2022) data show these impacts are vast and range from increased inequalities, learning loss, drop-out rates and declining mental health. During the pandemic, mandated distance learning, administrative response along with changing classroom dynamics and environments have been linked to an increase in teacher stress and burnout (Pressley, 2021). To mitigate further devastation in public education, there is an urgent need to expand our understanding of teacher perspectives and their support systems. This includes examining teacher response and management of professional tasks and pedagogical strategies over the past two years: mandated distancing, adoption of virtual modalities and implementation of physical health and personal protection equipment (PPE) in the classroom.

This research seeks to fill this gap by documenting the lived experience and perspectives of teachers on the ground during the social event in question. As societies move forward in the post-pandemic world, addressing the impact of mandated school reform policies on educators and educational support systems will be critical to recovering from these disruptions (UNESCO, 2022). This study examines these myriad disruptions through situational factors influencing teacher perspectives and sense of teaching-efficacy during this unique social context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explored the perspectives of educators during the 2020-2021 school years. Specifically, two research questions were addressed: (a) how do teachers perceive their teaching efficacy within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic health and safety guidelines? and (b) how have teachers characterized factors that influence(d) their teaching efficacy during the pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

At the secondary education level, teaching effectively in the classroom setting is interconnected with a teacher's ability to manage their classroom and maintain structured engagement with students (Bucher & Manning, 2001; Glasser, 2013). In terms of incorporation of virtual learning in classrooms, past literature shows that the nature of more traditional education methods cannot be universally applied to virtual modalities (DiPietro, 2010; Warburton, 2009). Rather, virtual instruction methods need to remain flexible to provide a robust learning experience for students.

Teaching in-person during the pandemic cannot be separated from the virtual learning experience during the early months of 2020. As such, recognition that student learning outcomes were greatly impacted by the loss of in-person instruction and structure of a physical school is crucial. Accountability for student learning outcomes is often misdirected to the abilities of teachers, regardless of the context and challenges educators face. The full scope of students who have fallen behind and teachers who have experienced damaging levels of emotional and social fatigue is currently unknown. For this reason, it is necessary to explore the literature on the potential pitfalls of virtual learning to better understand the nature of teaching during the pandemic as a whole.

There are many advantages to virtual learning like scheduling flexibility and scale of outreach. Most studies on the topic of virtual learning have focused more on higher education, however, further research on this topic during the current pandemic will inform our understanding of how teacher effectiveness can be affected when using different teaching modalities at the k-12 learning levels (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020). Collectively, K-12 educators experienced the reality that traditional and quality pedagogy, which hinge on effective communication between teachers and students, are methods that must be adapted to translate to the virtual environment (Hebeci et al., 2020; Varlejs, 2003).

Unfamiliarity with virtual modalities can lead to teachers falling back on traditional methods that do not facilitate robust interaction or satisfactory communication during instruction (Jin, 2005), leading to higher levels in teacher dissatisfaction (Kaya & Önder, 2002). The shift to virtual learning in 2020 afforded little time for educators to alter lesson plans or classroom instruction strategies to fit pedagogical strategies into a virtual platform. Scheduling during this time was also very uncertain as the initial recommendations for quarantine and distance learning were expected to be short-term.

Teaching through virtual modality can impact overall teaching efficacy because it fundamentally changes the way teachers are able to interact with their students and manage behaviors in a classroom context with no physical space associated with it. Most factors influencing teaching efficacy were outside the control of educators during the 2019-2020 school year. A lack of access to technological devices and uniform adequate broadband coverage for both teachers and students led to lower levels of engagement and sporadic attendance, especially for students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and largely student groups of

color; also disproportionately impacted by this lack of access during COVID-19 were educators of color (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine [NASEM], 2021).

Lower SES students are at a much higher risk of falling behind due to lack of adequate online resources and subsequent loss of in-person instructional time; special education and remedial-action students dependent on parental inclusion for virtual learning are also at risk of falling behind (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Delcker et al., 2020). This means the gap between student groups historically without access to adequate technology, technological support and basic resources offered by a physical classroom, will continue to widen without contingencies put in place to catch those at risk of falling through the cracks. For educators, feelings of readiness for continued online pedagogy are related to material and infrastructural support system (Lapada et al., 2020). Given this information, future policy recommendations and school reform action will be particularly relevant in the event of another public health crisis.

Current attitudes associated with virtual learning, and the increase in technology use in the classroom, may overlap more with general and personal efficacy for teachers than the literature published pre-pandemic suggests. Reasons for this could likely include the near ubiquitous incorporation and implementation of technology in the classroom over the past few decades. Sokal et al. found that teacher burnout and resiliency were significantly correlated with perceived efficacy in times of uncertainty, workplace change and attitudes toward technology (2020). Studies found an overabundance of mandated technology use can disrupt an educator's sense of work life balance and influence future willingness to utilize online modality (Califf & Brooks, 2020; Chou & Chou, 2021). The management of teacher expectations and development of a robust support system for educators will be a crucial factor in maintaining teacher retention moving forward in the post-pandemic world.

During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, categorized by the delta variant, many schools across the United States returned to in-person instruction in either partial or full capacity. The literature previously discussed here brings into question the experience of *being* an educator when there is no physical learning space. However, the return to school was anything but a return to ‘normal’. Currently, there are few studies that have addressed the impact of the presence of PPE and safety protocols related to slowing the transmission rates of COVID-19 impact in-person classroom management and perceived self-efficacy for educators.

Information on appropriate measures and instrument validity and reliability related to these specific concepts is limited because of how recent the ubiquitous return to in-person teaching happened and how myriad variations in on-site protocol changed and developed across different regions of the United States. However, a construction of valid scales for measuring teaching self-efficacy, in terms of classroom management, deals with items related to control of physical space and educational resources in addition to behavior management and correction (O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011). These categorical definitions of classroom management are useful in understanding the tasks and challenges teachers experience in everyday practice.

While information may currently be limited, available literature suggests the initial return to in-person learning remains an unfamiliar scene in terms of the more traditional model of classroom learning. Findings from Scott-Weber’s pilot study suggest the initial return to in-person learning while following these safety protocols led to changes in classroom seating, instructor interaction, and student collaboration (2021). This study adds to literature suggestions that future studies address the concept of PPE protocols and COVID-19 safety guidelines’ impact on in-person teaching-efficacy in terms of classroom management.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Two primary theoretical perspectives informed this study. First, Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy with its focus on individual's belief in their capacity to succeed in their situational objectives and attain their goals, was used as a foundational roadmap to provide both structure and direction for this study (Bandura, 1997, 2006). This theory has particular relevance for teaching during the pandemic because of the myriad situational impacts COVID-19 had on learning environments and pedagogical strategies. This created perceived *tensions* for educators as they navigated rapid, conflicting and competing pedagogical demands, with these tensions ultimately leading to uncertainty in perceived efficacy of a teacher's performance when coupled with unexpected outcomes (Berry, 2007). For this study, tensions can be used to illustrate the developmental concept of assessing self-efficacy for teachers teaching in-person versus their experience with distanced learning.

Aligned with this conceptual framework is the lens of symbolic interactionism, providing an additional theoretical perspective to this study. Symbolic interactionism is based on core tenets that social interaction is conditional and dependent on context between social actors and situations (Blumer, 1969). Fundamental to this perspective is the idea that meaning derives and is continually created and negotiated from the subjective understanding of these interactions (Blumer, 1969). Social situations within specific social settings can be understood as interconnected with behaviors and interactions that can be meaningfully expressed and can provide insight into certain group perspectives (Carter & Alvarado, 2019). First-hand experience and knowledge imparted by the social actors closest to an event have valuable and 'thick' descriptions that add to our collective social understanding (Geertz, 1972). In the context of this research study, it is necessary to understand how teachers perceive their interactions with

students and in-building administration within a social context that is markedly different from pre-pandemic pedagogy.

Focusing on the individual interactions that educators experience in times of risk and uncertainty can also illustrate the need to widen the evaluation standards, by which teachers are judged, to reflect more than just student performance on standardized exams. A large amount of the social formation of ‘self’ for students happens in the school environment and is influenced by interactions with the instructor as role model and the source of structure. Educators derive professional satisfaction with students through both learning outcomes and positive emotional development (Lasky, 2005). Teachers who have had to question if there is a supportive system to safeguard their own emotional and social well-being may not be able to provide the same level of support to their students and colleagues in a meaningful way that generates a shared understanding of confidence, inclusion and academic success (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2021). As public health risks continues to mount in our society, the rise of both technological intrusion into the field of education and the disproportionate accumulation of said risk for groups of lower SES and people of color will be inevitable (Beck et al., 1992).

Bridging these two theoretical perspectives situates this study within both the substantive and symbolic aspects of pandemic teaching. This qualitative study is exploratory and focuses on the way in which participants define themselves and their role as educators within this unique social context. Because this study attempts to capture a view of society from micro-level interactions between actors, the subjective understanding comes from the shared meaning derived from symbols (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Self-efficacy for educators, as discussed above, hinges on their *perceived* ability to teach effectively (Bandura, 2006). Traditionally, this

subjective perception has been constructed through the physical formation of the classroom and their performance of teaching within it. Teachers and students occupy the same space with mutual understanding that the classroom is a structured place for learning. However, the classroom structure exists within the larger social system of the school. Behaviors of individuals are generated socially and managed by their agency to access shared values, rules and materials offered within the macro social structure (Giddens, 1986). Teachers managing behaviors specific to learning provide structure and communicate ways of *being* in the learning environment. This communication is produced and reproduced by through simultaneous micro and macro-level interactions.

As noted earlier, these shared spaces and interactions were abruptly removed and replaced when the pandemic erupted; bedrooms, kitchen tables, or any available spot became classrooms. The ubiquitous closure of most, if not all, public spaces meant educational spaces became isolated from the social interaction that is necessary to facilitate and meaningfully communicate information.

Performance of a role for the subject—in this case performing the role of teacher—is inherently tied to the understanding and acceptance of that performance as legitimate by the socially appropriate audience (Goffman, 1949). Performing well as an educator at the beginning of 2020 became about more than just a passion for teaching and a demonstration of communicating knowledge as a skill set. It required access to quality broadband, managing technical issues and keeping track of students with little means to access their classroom. The return to in-person learning also brought many changes and challenges for educators. Adoption of PPE and COVID-19 safety protocols introduced a radically different structure to the physical classroom. Face masks and plexiglass barriers created a separation inside the classroom; while

teachers were back in-person, they were still performing their role as educators for their audience at a distance. Reducing the ability to act and perform in a meaningfully understood way leads to a reduction in human agency (Bandura, 2006).

While there is resiliency in the ability of social actors to adapt to societal change and uncertainty, this process takes time. Literature has shown that uncertainty in the workplace environment in times of crisis is tied to actor efficacy; retaining motivations and well-being will be top priorities to regain a common sense of understanding between actors in the field of education moving forward (Baloran & Hernan, 2020). COVID-19 created a rapidly changing workplace environment in the field of education. The push to distance learning through virtual platforms was just one stage of that, and as discussed earlier, can have myriad impacts on teachers' ability to manage classroom experiences. A return to in-person learning brings with it potential risks from the continued pandemic and uncertainty for how the new 'normal' of public education teachers' commitment will influence workload and outlook (Baloran & Hernan, 2020). The close proximity to students on a daily basis affords teachers a crucial insight into effective learning outcomes and teaching strategies that are not always represented in educational reform at higher levels (Tai, 2013; Kin & Kareem, 2016).

The literature related here illustrates the urgent need to expand our understanding of the impact COVID-19 protocols and procedures had had on educators. With many disruptions to learning environments and professional responsibilities, teachers have had to adapt their traditional pedagogies and classroom management strategies in accordance with these mandated outside factors.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from nine in-depth interviews with secondary education teachers. Participants were recruited from a public middle school in the Southeast region of the United States. To maintain anonymity, I have labeled this study site Prime School. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Prime School's locale description is large, urban-centric area and is classified as a regular public school with no specialized program emphasis for special education or magnet schools (2022). Prime School enrolls grades from sixth to eighth with predominately White student population.

In October of 2021, I contacted the principal of Prime School via email, explained the purpose of my research study, and asked for permission to interview teachers on school campus. Seeking permission from the in-building administration was a requirement for Clemson University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. However, this led to establishing an initial "gatekeeper" to grant contact access to other participants as a school-wide email was sent to all teachers, informing them of my study (Atkinson et al., 2015). Having the head administrator of Prime School approve my study directly to all employed teachers helped establish legitimacy and trust (Creswell, 2016). This study was approved by Clemson's Institutional Review Board in November of 2021.

Interviews were conducted in March of 2022. From the school wide email, I established an initial convenience sample with five teachers, as recommended by Weiss (1995). In line with a grounded theory approach, eligible participants for this study shared a common experience and social sphere of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using snowball sampling, I asked initial participants for recommendations on who to contact next (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In total, I reached out to 13 participants and completed nine

interviews. In qualitative research, reaching saturation is an inductive process and is reached when data begin to repeat or no new issues are identified (Hennink et al., 2020). Past literature has shown that, using in-depth interviews, saturation was reached at nine interviews (Hennink et al., 2016). The interview process used in this study aligns with this notion, as there were very few new issues or themes emerging after the fifth interview. However, the remaining four interviews were useful in adding further contextual understanding and richness to the data.

Each interview took place during working hours in participants' classrooms and ranged from 33 minutes to an hour. Only one interview fell under the half hour mark. All participants agreed to let the interviews be audio recorded which allowed me to focus on being engaged with participants, aside from occasionally taking hand-written notes (Weiss, 1995). The interviews conducted for this study were semi-structured and began with having participants briefly relate demographic information and describe their level and years of teaching experience. These questions allowed me to familiarize myself with participants' background and establish rapport. I then asked participants to describe their experience teaching at the beginning of the pandemic. These protocols were designed to prompt participants to relate and expand on their experience with different aspects of teaching during COVID-19 in a somewhat chronological order. These protocols were informed by valid scales on teaching-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) relating to classroom management, access to educational and professional resources and experience with student engagement. The goal of these interview questions was to remain broad enough in topic to avoid overly narrowing or leading participant responses. As my approach to this qualitative research was an iterative process, I modified the protocol questions to include prompts for relevant emergent themes. The guiding interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Procedures for Rigor and Validity

In qualitative research, it is important to ensure the data and interpretations remain deeply aligned to the research questions. Considerations for validity in a qualitative study require researchers to reflect on the data collection procedures, interpretation of findings and the larger social impact of such research (Sayrs, 1998). Keeping this in mind, I employed “member checking,” a strategy that allows participants to offer their insights on initial data interpretations (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Using this strategy, I modified my protocols to reflect the emergent themes and codes from previous interviews and prompted participants to discuss their thoughts on the credibility of my emergent theme categories. Because the data collection and analysis were an iterative process, I was able to add emergent theme concepts to the protocol prompts and discuss them with participants during interviews. This discussion allowed participants to express and expand on whether these emergent themes and analysis accurately represented their experience. It was through this strategy that the in-vivo code of “Accountability” emerged and crystallized as a central theme of participants’ experience. In terms of reliability, I utilized memoing after each interview and during initial coding. As suggested by Hesse-Biber (2017), memoing throughout this entire process allowed me to practice reflexivity through this running dialogue, ensuring my findings remained in line with the interpretive approach to contextual and participant understanding (p. 327).

Data Preparation and Analysis

The data analysis process consisted of several steps including preparing transcripts alongside memo writing, identifying preliminary codes, and sorting data comparisons as emergent themes solidified, respectively. Working with qualitative data in this way was an iterative process that focused on describing and grounding findings in the larger sociological context. Below I describe the process of working with the data in detail.

After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audio files using speech to text software from Otter.ai. Using this automated application streamlined the transcription process but required editing each interview line by line as audio files were played back. In the process of transcription, I chose to exclude most rambling or grammatically inaccurate language and filler words, as recommended by Devault (2004), a decision that was necessary to condense textual data and make it easier to read without compromising the overall meaning. The choice to personally edit transcriptions, in lieu of outsourcing this process to a third party, was twofold as it allowed me to fully familiarize myself with the data and allowed me to immediately begin memo writing. Hesse-Biber (2017) argues memo writing is one of many effective “first run through the data techniques” to describe and organize textual data to identify preliminary codes (p. 311).

The second step was the creation of a codebook for preliminary codes. I began assigning preliminary codes to all relevant data segments in each transcript. While the number of preliminary codes remained flexible, I set an end goal of no more than 30-40 codes that were then set to be reduced into small units or categories (Creswell & Báez, 2020; MacQueen et al., 1998). In accordance with past literature, strategies employed for organizing and maintaining the codebook included a label, description, examples of when to use the code, when not to use the code and myriad examples from the textual data entries (Bazely, 2013; Bernard & Ryan, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.190-191).

For data analysis, I utilized a grounded theory approach through inductive data coding, while also constantly comparing participants’ responses to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic over one and a half academic school years. Using the licensed MAXQDA software, I began to sort data across all participants and topics. Through sorting, I made comparisons

between related data segments in order to identify and analyze different perceptions from all participants (Charmaz, 2006). During the process of memo writing and initial coding, early themes began to emerge from the data that participants perceived as hindering their ability to achieve their professional tasks and goals that they identified as specifically facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. I then condensed these related codes into four categories labeled “Initial Barriers,” Structural Barriers,” “Symbolic Structure,” and “Accountability.” For Initial Barriers, I distinguished two themes: uncertainty and lack of instructional system. For Structural Barriers, I identified the themes of health and safety protocols, implementing technology, and technology and behavior. For Symbolic Structure, the findings identify themes of connection with students, professional schedule and administrative support. Finally, “Accountability” was identified as an inductive theme, grounded in the collected data.

FINDINGS

In Table 1, I have summarized each in-depth interview by participant demographic information (i.e., gender, age, race and years of teaching experience), as well as relevant organizational information (i.e., teaching subject and grade level) to provide context for data analysis. To protect the identity of participants, I clustered the categories for Years of Experience and Age, used generalized language for teaching subject(s) during the 2020-2021 school years, and gave each participant a common pseudonym. Analysis of participant perspectives in this study shows that teachers perceived the presence of COVID-19 health and safety guidelines to have various impacts on their personal sense of teaching efficacy. Findings also show that participant’s perceived administrative response influenced their views on the social structure of their organization. While interviews included discussion of all stages of teaching through the 2020 pandemic, the bulk of findings related here relates to the return to in-person instruction,

classified as “Hybrid” in this report, as this stage was experienced the longest and identified as the most significant by all but one participant, who remained entirely virtual.

Every participant identified related experiencing some variation of each theme, with differences reflected in individual perceptions of each theme and their influence over the course of pandemic. It is worth mentioning that the near constant change in recommended guidelines and implementation within Prime School from the 2019-2021 academic school years meant that barriers identified at one stage of the pandemic may not have had continuing influence across all stages. However, as analysis of these findings show, all participants perceived an interconnection between their personal experience with these barriers and the social structure of their school.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and In-depth Interview Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Experience	Subject	Grade	Duration
Ms. Worth	Female	White	35-39	10-14	Math	7 th -8 th	35
Ms. Silvers	Female	White	55-59	5-9	History	8 th	48
Mr. Miller	Male	White	40-44	20-24	History	6 th	32
Ms. Vance	Female	White	45-49	20-24	Math	6 th	45
Ms. Mill	Female	White	35-39	5-9	History	8 th	33
Ms. Homes	Female	White	25-29	5-9	Sp. Ed.	7 th -8 th	38
Mr. Grant	Male	White	40-44	5-9	Math	8 th	26
Ms. Hall	Female	White	45-49	10-14	Sp. Ed.	6 th	35
Ms. Greene	Female	White	45-49	5-9	Activities	6 th -8 th	48

Initial Barriers: Planning for Uncertainty

Uncertainty

In March of 2020, Prime School began to hear the rumblings of an impending shift from traditional, face-to-face instruction to an entirely virtual modality. Unsurprisingly, all nine participants stated they felt a sense of confusion and shock from the initial announcement that their school would be closing. Ms. Mill, an eighth-grade history teacher, recalls the rapid flow of ambiguous information right before hearing an official announcement:

I kind of had a gut feeling that it was going to be a bigger deal than what people locally were making it. Friday the 13th was our last day of school and I think they had started shutting down schools on the West Coast already. And I remember thinking, well, they won't shut us down. We're so far over here. We're isolated in [this state] and then going home on that Friday and having no clue that they were going to make that call Friday night. And then [the governor] made the call Friday night and teachers were completely blindsided. Completely blindsided. And I can't remember if I got an e-mail right before, but I don't think I did. I think we [teachers] all kind of found out at the same time when [the governor] made that announcement.

The result of this rapid shift to an entirely virtual modality meant that not only did teachers need to create and organize a working plan to facilitate online instruction for the duration initially set at two weeks, but it also meant there was no prior precedent to handle the academic school year. Like many aspects of the initial stages of the pandemic, this timeline was subject to constant change and the flow of necessary information of criteria coming from state and district-level administration was slow to reach teachers. Relating the immense challenge of trying to prepare a professional teaching strategy, Ms. Worth, an eighth-grade math teacher replied, "I think my game plan changed from what the school and the district were telling me 20 times in a matter of a week and a half."

Lack of Instructional Systems

This lack of stable information coupled with the unprecedented shift in instruction marked the initial barrier of practicality perceived by teachers. Participants like Mr. Grant, another eight-grade math teacher, related a sense of immense pressure to adapt traditional criteria for online instruction while also maintaining his current level of teaching rigor as the end of the school year approached. The juxtaposition between managing expectations without explicit communication of adjusted standards, he explained, created a sense of chaos in the workplace:

Honestly, I was shocked that we weren't going to be in school, and of course there wasn't obviously any time to plan ahead for that. I'm a pretty big planner, so it was tough to try to hustle last second to put together lessons online, try to communicate electronically with students of this age especially. It was a little pressure for me because they didn't—from a state testing standpoint, they kind of waited to the last second to say they were going to waive the tests for that year. So that time of year is usually like our crunch time, trying to cram in the rest of our standards and make sure we get to everything before they're tested on it. That was sort of a personal standpoint. It was just very chaotic and really stressful. And of course, the kids weren't exactly motivated. It was just early summer for the most of them it seems like.

School closures in 2020 came near the tail-end of the academic year, a significant time for standardized testing of core subjects like English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics as required by public schools, according to assessment standards set at the state level. These testing requirements are statewide standard assessments and are critical to assess student performance and teacher evaluation alike. Cancellation of these examinations is evidence of the severe disruption COVID-19 caused in the normal school year in such a short period of time. Apart from the sporadic and limited information coming from state and district-level administration, a major contributing factor to initial barriers was the lack of systems in place for teachers to facilitate communication and instruction online. Take Mr. Miller, a teacher with more than 20 years of experience, who likened navigating the rapid move to online modality for his 6th grade history classes to reinventing the wheel:

Mr. Miller:

So, because that Monday, I recall, I think coming here to try to get materials and get stuff organized and I know my wife's a schoolteacher as well and she went into school to start trying to, I guess, invent the wheel per se for us. You know, there are other teachers that have online programs and of course my doctoral degree was all online. But when you do that for a living there is usually a system in place and that was the biggest thing for us. There was no system in place, whereas I did mine through the [redacted] academy. There were modules. You had to log on and, like college classes now, that you had to self-pace yourself through.

Interviewer:

So, there was nothing?

Mr. Miller:

For us and our district, there was little to nothing to begin with. It existed but it just didn't exist for us. So, like I said it was kind of reinventing the wheel and then you've got parameters set out that kids probably should be spending this much time per day on a lesson, so you try to build your lesson upon that. And I believe during the process that first month or two those numbers greatly, greatly dropped when they realized the lack of involvement from the students in this because for many of our students, March 13th was beginning of summer. And that's the reality of it.

These narratives illustrate the school-wide disruption caused by COVID-19 created a sense of chaos that made reaching common goals challenging without an established system in place to facilitate traditional instruction. Participants expressed frustration and concern for overall lower student participation and attendance in class due to a lack of a unifying standard system to utilize. As the situation currently sat at that time, technical accessibility problems, limited preparation time and the uncertainty around school wide COVID policies made the practicality of keeping students engaged and on track with standard criteria through virtual modality infeasible for educators.

It was clear from participant reports that moving forward in a meaningful way meant focusing efforts to a physical return to Prime School. To mitigate future disruptions from all-virtual learning in the coming fall semester, participants like 8th grade history teacher, Ms.

Silvers, volunteered to take part in a planning committee, which was focused on creating and implementing solutions:

I did volunteer myself to be on a planning committee that summer for starting back school in August. So, we had weekly—at least weekly meetings like a task force. What do we need to do to be ready for school to come back in [to school]? So, I think only then, that summer, it's like, okay, well, we just consider that [waving hand gesture], whatever, we got them through, you know? No one died if we were at home. But that summer, the task forces the district set up, and there was state task force as well, [were to discuss] how can we make it safe to come back to school? So that's when it got serious. We've got to do everything we can.

The move to all-virtual modality for Prime School lasted from March to May of the 2019-2020 school year. Creating a feasible plan to return to in-person instruction was recognized as the top priority, at state and district-levels, for teachers to implement in the coming academic year.

Structural Barriers: Keeping Students out of Virtual Land

In the Fall of 2020, Prime School returned to in-person instruction in a little less than three months. This solution hinged on the implementation distancing measures and offering simultaneous virtual learning for individuals at risk, those who tested positive, and those who became exposed and needed to quarantine. This new hybrid phase of instruction, while challenging, was ultimately adopted to keep students physically in school and remained in place from the August 2020 until the end of the school year in spring 2021. Keeping school physically in session was recognized as the primary goal of Prime School. When I asked Ms. Silvers how she felt about the response by administration to prioritize a return to in-person instruction she replied:

It was just kind of, it was positive. It was very positive. And we were told, point blank our goal is to keep the kids in school. You know, if we learned something, that's great. But the goal was to keep them [students] here and I applaud them for that. Completely applaud that philosophy. So, it could have repercussions down the road. And I think we are seeing some of it. Like, again, the rigor but we had to do it. They need to be here. Yeah, they need to be here. They don't need what we did that March through May, Oh, crap! That was, again, flying by the seat of your pants.

While it was recognized by all 9 participants that returning to school was preferable, every participant also related the hybrid solution as the most challenging part of the 2020-2021 school year. A series of safety protocols were implemented during this phase of hybrid that had varying effects for teachers in their day-to-day tasks. This overwhelming consensus by participants is a testament to how fundamental traditional, face-to-face instruction is for middle grade schooling. The physical barriers discussed by participants were in relation to classroom management, of which the most significant included managing health and safety requirements implemented in accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), limitations to preferred teaching style, implementing technology and behavior management during hybrid instruction.

Health and Safety Protocols

As expected, Prime School required an extensive overhaul in day-to-day procedures to limit exposure and ensure the safety of teachers and students. Prime School, like many, adopted zero tolerance policies for masks, desk-shields, and distance protocols to be implemented across all grades and subjects. This was a massive undertaking for teachers to manage all at once as both classroom space and classroom accessibility became severely limited. The limitations discussed here are related to participant's classroom management capacity, as defined by Brophy (2006), which specifically refers the function of maintaining an engaging learning environment within the physical structure of a classroom (p. 17). Out of the three physical safety measures discussed here, the presence of desk shields was recognized by all participants as the most challenging aspect.

Participants discussed the ways in which the necessary health and safety regulations impacted their preferred teaching style. Distancing measures mandated that teachers limit

interactions with and between students during instruction. This proved particularly challenging by eliminating group work or individual instruction for those students needing help. When I asked Mr. Grant if these physical regulations impacted his preferred teaching style, he replied:

Yes. I rarely sit down. I'm a proximity person. When I teach, I'm trying to move around the room a lot. Normally with math, I'm really big on working individually with a student or one-on-one. I really like to pull a chair [up] beside them. We kind of think together and of course that was totally different. I felt glued to the front of the room which was really odd for me.

And also, the way we were set up with, if you saw or heard, we had these plastic desk shields that were pretty big. Covered the whole room or lounge desk and you know, of course I've got to put somebody towards the back of the room. And just to see towards the beginning of the year, I sat down and, I'm pretty tall, and I don't know how they could see my board with those desk shields and students in front of them with their desk shields and things like that. So just yeah, the physical setup was also really tough to teach the way I am accustomed to teaching.

Here we can see how limited instruction became, hindering the function classrooms down to utility; in Mr. Grant's case, constantly being unsure if students can actually see what is happening, let alone facilitating a robust learning environment through engagement. This lack of teacher control over classroom organization and accessibility from COVID safety measures illustrates the importance in maintaining agency of physical classroom management and its many crucial functions of teaching efficacy (Brophy, 1988, O'Neill & Stephenson, 2011). Not only did physical barriers limit classroom organization, but also impeded participants' ability to monitor behavior, limit distractions and keep instruction on a steady pace. Four participants expressed myriad issues with behavior due to the presence of desk shields. Participants described instances of increased cheating, hindered proximity to students, to ensuring students were on task. This element of classroom control remained a constant challenge during hybrid.

While all participants related experiencing major issues with the physical barriers discussed here, not everyone took a similar approach to modifying their teaching during this phase. While

some participants expressed, they felt “glued” to one spot or limited in their preferred teaching style, other participants found work arounds to better manage COVID-19 precautions. For example, Ms. Homes, a supplementary special education teacher with smaller class sizes chose to limit the amount of time spent tracking coronavirus exposure by creating a static seating chart that stayed in place all year; Or Mr. Miller, who began to utilize group work, after safety regulations began to relax, through rotating stations every 14 minutes in accordance with CDC and School guidelines. While the approaches to viewing and dealing with these physical limitations differed, there is no question that this element of hybrid education had an impact on participants’ perception of their professional goals and achievements. These factors, being outside the control of each participant, were experienced and handled differently in each classroom, which aligns with the idea of self-efficacy being subjective and situationally determined (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

Implementing Technology

Through the interviewing process, another major sub-theme of physical barriers identified by participants were the many challenges to integrating technology. Initially, the interview guide prompted participants to describe their experience using technology during the initial shift to all-virtual, as the assumption was the move to all-virtual would be the most technology-dense phase of teaching during the pandemic. However, it was during the second interview that I was introduced to the situational problems surrounding technology during hybrid—synchronous instruction with students physically present and virtual students using the video software, mainly WebEx. During this interview, Ms. Silvers described a sense of chaos trying to teach “students in reality” while barely being able to manage “students in virtual land.”

After reflecting on this conversation, I adapted the interview protocol to prompt participants on their experience related to this element of hybrid.

While only three participants described themselves as very comfortable in their capability to use technology, all participants identified severe limitations to teaching virtual students simultaneously with students in their classroom. It is important to point out that during this portion of hybrid, digital materials were required for all classwork and assignments as physical materials for assignments was discouraged to limit the spread of COVID-19. Ms. Vance, a math teacher of over 20 years, described the feeling of managing this situation: “Super complicated. Yeah. It was like juggling knives.” Another participant described trying to engage virtual students during class time and manage electronic lecture notes as a trainwreck, an impossible situation they likened to a nightmare. Such strong language here is indicative of participants feeling overwhelmed as they stretched themselves thin to try and manage everything at once through technology. This narrative is supported by literature that notes as technology is increasingly integrated within the field of education, specifically K-12, educators may feel a sense of overload from technology, an experience correlated with teacher burnout (Califf & Brooks, 2020). When asked about her experience with technology usage during hybrid, comments made by Ms. Mill illustrate this conceptual link between technology overload and teacher burnout:

I’m very tech savvy. That’s why I didn’t struggle so much with the WebEx as some other teachers did. And I thought if we were going to have WebEx again that there were going to be some walkouts because we had some teachers who struggled all year with it.

Technology and Behavior

The challenges of managing both physical and virtual students during hybrid were not limited to participants' technical skillset, but also through maintaining control through a sense of connection. Participants, like Ms. Greene, quickly began to realize the reality of the situation:

I tried in the beginning to have them be part of the class, but it was way too distracting. Because in the beginning, I had them up here [on the front screen], so they were actually as physically in the class as they could be. But, you know, like a brother walked through in his underwear. And then once that happened, it was, you know, no, we're not going to do this anymore. Because I don't have control over what's going on in the child's house. A parent used foul language. You know, there were just a few things that happened like that and I'm like before anything really damaging happens, I'm just going to take them off of here [front screen].

This lack of control over the classroom experience for students in “virtual land” is linked to diminished teaching efficacy to control the physical classroom and limit distractions. Because of this, many teachers had no choice but to limit interaction with virtual students to salvage instruction time and classroom management. However, this lack of control didn't extend to just the classroom environment structure, it also limited participants' ability to maintain appropriate student engagement and discipline.

Five participants described instances where virtual students during hybrid, while logged on for attendance, were entirely disengaged from the normal school day and classroom. This concerning development in student absenteeism was recognized by participants, like Ms. Vance, as a problem for learning outcomes for students after losing so much instructional time from the previous school year:

The kids at home were not as engaged as the kids at school. Just as a general rule, I would say maybe 10 to 20% of kids at home were actively engaged in learning when they were at home and the rest of them kind of just, they were there. I could see them on screen. Maybe they would turn stuff in and maybe they wouldn't. There was one child in particular, whenever I would call on them, they would turn their WebEx meeting off, and then email me and tell me that their internet went out. And so, they refused to engage with the class at all. I couldn't call on them whatsoever. Another thing was, I mean, they [students] had

essentially missed nearly half of the previous year. And we had to kind of bring those kids up to speed as to what they needed to know from what they had lost from the previous year.

This narrative shows participants recognize the inherent role being physically present in the classroom can play for maintaining an engaging learning environment. All participants made the concession that not all virtual students were prone to disengage during class time, but that those who were would most likely be the students needing extra attention during the normal school year. With students of this age group, maintaining a consistent routine and clearly communicating expectations and consequences is the driving force of social classroom management. It should also be noted that some participants teaching eighth grade discussed their issues with managing behavior and disengagement during hybrid as grade-specific, and speculated there would be more problems associated with younger age groups. Describing her experience with disengaged virtual students, Ms. Mill explained:

I don't know if that was admin or if it was district office or if it was attendance, but these kids were counted present and continued to be counted present, because they were physically in front of their screen. But they were doing absolutely nothing. I mean, I had one student who literally, you could see his TV and his screen and his Xbox controller headset on and his controller in his hands. I mean every day and there was no consequence for that whatsoever. So, until I want to say until halfway through third nine weeks into fourth nine weeks when they really started buckling down, and one of the reasons they buckled down was because of summer school. They used summer school to kind of use that to offset those absences for the kids who would not show up, well then, they had to come to summer school. To be able to move forward.

Here, we see how Prime School's administration shifted their traditional operation to reinforce a system of consequences through buckling down on absences for disengaged virtual students to enforce and maintain expected outcomes. This relates to a larger concept of how micro and macro structures influence each other within a social system (Giddens, 1986). Here, participants recognized their professional agency to enforce classroom procedure during instruction ended within their four walls unless bolstered by the larger administrative structure. Working in tandem

this way, Ms. Mill describes the flexible administrative support as an important structural component to overall teaching efficacy in Prime School.

Symbolic Structure: Navigating the Changing Roles of Pandemic Teaching

This section of findings expands on the social and symbolic themes related to teaching during the pandemic. These themes explore the social role dynamics teachers navigated between students and the in-building administration during this unique period of educational change. The themes identified here are connection with students, professional schedule and administrative support. Findings up to this point have discussed teacher micro-level experience managing various physical and technical barriers to teaching. Now, through more of a macro-lens, I move to examine the group dynamics within the school structure that constitute social rules and professional conduct.

Connection with Students

The development and deliverance of course curricula aid in teaching and rapport building (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001). In this way, fostering an emotional connection with students is crucial to the creation of a robust learning environment (Hargreaves 2000; Lasky, 2005). In the context of teaching during the pandemic, participants expressed concern for the lack of connection they could maintain with virtual students. When I asked Mr. Miller about this, he explained:

There were some challenges as far as the interaction is concerned but when I got online and if there was communication with me and a student at that point in the year, I can visualize that student. I know that student. I've got a relationship with that student. And when I put out an assignment, I know pretty well what I should be getting in return from that student. That was to me a less of a challenge than last year doing a hybrid model and having some students that your only interaction is you see them visually on the screen for the most part. And to me, last year was more of a challenge than those two months at the end of 2020. The hybrid ones [students]. And that's just simply because of the lack of interaction and lack of communication. And what we do is built upon relationships and understanding your kid, your students and sometimes, and a lot of times, I felt like that was

missed for the ones that were virtual only. I think it might even would have been simpler to have them all virtual or none at all.

As mentioned earlier, the hybrid model in place at this school allowed parents to choose if their child would remain entirely virtual or not. While students were required to become virtual if they were exposed to or tested positive for COVID, a small portion of students opted for the entirely virtual model during the 2020-2021 school year. This narrative illustrates that teachers' ability to build a relationship with students is inherently tied to appropriately gauging their academic and social performance. Furthermore, teachers felt the academic and social development of their students was contingent on maintaining a consistent relationship through communication. During the pandemic, core prerogatives of teaching did not fall just on facilitating academic instruction but were interconnected with recognizing emotional and social needs of students. Participants differed in their approach to balance academic instruction with virtual students they could not traditionally engage with. For example, Ms. Greene, prioritized her related arts assignments to lower perceived student stress during the pandemic:

So, the most difficult challenge was giving assignments that I thought would hook the kids into doing them when they weren't doing assignments, even for the classes that they traditionally thought they had to do their assignments for.

It was like the school brain fell out of the child when they were under so much pressure and under so much insecurity about this disease that was taking over, you know? And I think, rightfully so. It [COVID-19] was demanding a lot of attention on the news. It was everywhere. In all of their social media. They were scared. They didn't know if they were going to live or die, if everybody was going to die, if their parents or grandparents were going to die. It was it was about dying. And so, when you have that kind of stress on you know, is the school assignment going to be at your top priority? And then a lot of parents just didn't know how to deal with the kids not working, you know, they didn't know how to teach their kids the curriculum that was coming through.

Rather than relying on traditional rubrics for related arts, she shifted her focus to create assignments students would *want* to engage with. This narrative illustrates two points of interest

for teacher experience during the pandemic. The first, is that educators here recognize the function of assigning curricula is not solely to gauge academic performance but is also a tool to engage with students on a more emotional level. The second point is that educators may be constrained in how they adapt curricula to include a more individualized focus on the emotional and social needs of their students. In Prime School, like many public schools across the United States, administrative and teacher evaluation has become increasingly tied to student performance and state standards (Paino, 2017); thus, an educator's individual agency—how teachers act and behave within their school—will be contingent on the functions mandated school reform and policies of the larger educational structures impact their social and material access (Golann, 2018, Lasky & Sue, 2005 p 900; Swidler, 1986).

Professional Schedule

All nine participants described elements of teaching during the pandemic as having an impact on their professional schedule. It is important to note that while factors influencing professional schedule are varied, they are also all interconnected with the themes related in this report. Mentioned previously, implementation of technology during hybrid, time spent adapting traditional curriculum for virtual students and the management of classroom instruction time with distancing protocols are all time-consuming tasks that are in addition to participants' workload. In line with participants' perception that interacting with virtual students during hybrid as more challenging, this is also the case for grading assignments and communication with students. Two participants related issues with keeping their engagement with students during working hours. When asked to describe her experience with managing assignments during hybrid, Ms. Greene described:

For the visual arts classes, I just put things on Google Classroom, and then they fit them in, you know, they would get a list of assignments that were due or coming due, just like

Google Classroom does for them. And then they would be right there with their English and math and social studies and whatever else they were taking, and they would just do them on their own time and then submit them. The workload from it, though, was a lot on my part and I would get questions and submissions at two o'clock in the morning! I mean, it was it was a 24-hour job. Now, did I always answer the two o'clock questions? No. A lot of times I would wait because I'm thinking well, maybe those kids' parents don't even know they're up, you know, but they're sending me, "Well, I wanted to do this with those but this isn't coming out right. Could you look at this and tell me what I could do?" And I feel bad but I'm also thinking, you know, it's two o'clock in the morning. Normally, I cut my time that I communicate with students off at like 11 o'clock [at night]. But I got more from students late at night. So, I also think that my students were working in the middle of the night, and sometimes just odd.

This narrative illustrates a collapse of enforceable structure in the school day for teachers to engage with students who are not present during physical instruction. Ms. Homes, who expressed some of her students “loved to start the school day at 11:00 at night,” also found it difficult to manage last minute adjustments in instruction for students who became virtual when needing to quarantine. This near-constant revolving door of routine change had a significant impact on the workload for teachers. The undue stress of managing student engagement during hybrid or all-virtual modality has implications on teacher burnout and attrition. This was most notable by Ms. Hall, who firmly stated:

There's no way I'd do it again. I wouldn't do it again. I don't—it doesn't matter what I do, I wouldn't do it again. It's already too hard. Maybe because I'm older, I don't know. But it's almost impossible to manage the students. It's already hard enough to manage the students, but to manage them when they are not present with you is really hard.

While all nine participants related some form of negative experience engaging with virtual students, this statement by Ms. Hall has the most illustrative narrative directly grounded in the concept of teaching efficacy and teacher attrition related COVID-19 education policies.

Administrative Support

In connection with professional schedules, school administrative policies play a crucial role in a teachers' capacity to manage professional tasks and responsibilities. Several participants described the adoption of different policies and protocols through the pandemic as “a lot of trial

and error.” While COVID-19 health and safety protocols were often decided at the state and district level, it was in-building administration that decided how teachers were to implement them. All nine participants expressed feeling supported by the in-building administration during the pandemic. More specifically, eight out of nine participants felt that the in-building administration, mainly the principal of Prime School, did everything they could to ease the burden teachers felt managing COVID policies and procedures during the 2019-2021 school years.

While there was an overall acknowledgement from all participants that their school administration was supportive, individuals varied in their perceptions of support. Ms. Hall linked her perception of support in Prime School by saying “I definitely felt supported here. You know, they were very good about giving days off, you know, encouraging you to take time off.” This narrative illustrates a link between perceived administrative support with an awareness of their professional schedule and workload. Another participant, Mr. Miller, echoed this sentiment in more detail, describing satisfaction with in-building administration to their awareness of mental and emotional health of staff:

Mental health burnout, those things I would say that I would definitely give our district and our school credit for their approach as far as the mental health aspect is concerned as far as the support they gave teachers. For example, our boss told us last year, he said our school dress for teachers this year is COVID casual. Show up and teach, as long as you’re clothed [laugh] and just a little something like that for a teacher, yeah. So, I'm sitting here in jeans today, because we're kind of still on that process. So, if I want to wear jeans, I wear jeans. I'm going wear jeans and T shirt on Thursday, and there are other schools that are not like that, but there's just little things like that, that do help.

Here, participants recognize administrative efforts to shape the school culture as positive and encouraging, despite the added hardships of teaching during COVID. Mentioned earlier, Ms. Silvers felt the administration created a positive atmosphere through communicating a unified, school-wide vision to keep students out of ‘virtual land.’ Ms. Worth and Ms. Greene linked their

perception of administrative support to positive communication of professional responsibilities and allocation of additional classroom materials, respectively. The specific elements of administrative support and staff management from school principals related here have been linked to increased teaching efficacy (Simon & Johnson, 2015) Only one participant, Ms. Mill, while still acknowledging an overall element of support, felt that administrative efforts were lacking during issues with virtual students during hybrid.

Perception of administrative support from teachers cannot be overstated. Five participants linked their perception of administrative support to the concept of teacher attrition. For example, Ms. Vance, when asked if she felt supported by the administration through the pandemic replied:

I have said one thousand times that if I didn't work at this school, when all of this went down, there's no way I could have... I probably would have taken a leave of absence. This is, I think, my fifth public school I've worked for and under no administration besides this, could this have been even remotely effective. And when I say remotely, I really mean remotely.

Participant links to structural, material and emotional support from administration in this study are supported in literature as having a positive influence on overall teacher attrition (Hughes et al., 2015; Kabia, 2021).

Accountability

In connection with the themes related in “Symbolic Structure, the final emergent theme from the data was the in-vivo code “Accountability.” Grounded in the data, this term was used by participants to express a lack of control over student engagement, work ethic and behavior management. This term was mentioned directly 17 times by participants in seven interviews, with the defined sentiment discussed indirectly in the remaining two interviews. All participants linked lower levels of accountability for students with some element of virtual learning facilitated by the pandemic. Relating her perception of student accountability during the pandemic, Ms. Vance replied:

It was awful with a capital A. The transition was very, very difficult for me to go from in-person teaching to all that we had to do online. And it was awful because there was no accountability from students. And there was literally nothing we could do about it.

Here, the narrative is clear that participants viewed establishing and enforcing

accountability in students as outside of their control and separate than their perceived teaching efficacy. To illustrate this narrative, other specific situational mentions by participants for lowered accountability during the pandemic included lack of student engagement, lack of parental involvement, loss of physical proximity during instruction time and school policies that were considered lax for late assignments and attendance. All elements of accountability in the data were perceived through the lens of outside the control of teachers.

Three participants (Ms. Mill, Mr. Miller and Ms. Vance) linked lower accountability for students with district-level mandates, in-building administrative efforts and trending school reform policies. Though not all of these elements are directly related to the pandemic, participants felt lowered student accountability during this time will have a lasting impact moving forward. As Ms. Vance explained:

I think students lost a lot of accountability during that time. And until they're held accountable 100% of the time and realize that we're not going to let up on that, I don't think that kids will be the same, in general. I mean maybe in six or eight years, when we have students who were babies when this happened, and now they've gone through all of the school years not having to deal with COVID. Maybe it will go back, potentially, to how it was. But I think the world has changed too much that I don't think it will ever...I think that we were already moving in the direction of less accountability for students, and this accelerated, in a year and a half, two years--whatever it's been--has accelerated that lack of accountability by five or more years.

Not all perceived loss of accountability was combatable. As related to the themes in initial barriers, a lack of system in place limited student and teacher accessibility to instruction. However, while Ms. Mill recognized the lack of technological infrastructure and uncertainty during the beginning of the pandemic meant lower accountability for students was to be

expected. The same participant also expressed that the continued lack of accountability for students could only be offset by administrative action. She explained:

As the year progressed there was more accountability for kids having to login. They created all these different codes for attendance. Like so if you are quarantined and you log in all your classes you get a special attendance code that counted you virtually present, so that they go against your days. But, if you were quarantined and you didn't log in, and you didn't complete the work, you still had to put that work within five days of returning, but you were kind of absent for those 10 days. So as the year progressed, we saw more and more accountability when it came to kids doing the work.

When administrative policies increase accountability efforts on educators, teachers are often caught in a balancing act of exercising individual teaching-efficacy and pedagogy with varying administrative restrictions (Metz, 2003; Valli & Buese, 2007). This narrative supports the “Administrative Support” theme related earlier in this report and shows administrative receptiveness to aid in teacher/student accountability dynamics during hybrid bolstered participants’ agency and eased their sense of stress. The “Accountability” theme is also indirectly related to teacher efficacy, as student engagement and academic performance were linked by participants to their concept of professional evaluation.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative study sought to investigate middle school teachers' experience with teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and, more specifically, the situational factors that influenced these perceptions. This study adds nuance to the work on understanding educators' sense of teaching efficacy during an unprecedented time in the field of education. Amidst an ever-growing trend toward teacher evaluation and increasing responsibility for state performance standards, past studies highlight the potential pitfalls that implementing these reforms can have on teacher stress and overall attrition (Golan, 2018; Valli & Buese, 2007). Data from this study align with these views and contribute both a descriptive, chronological narrative of teacher experience with specific situational themes to answer the research questions guiding this study: (a) how do teachers perceive the impact on teaching efficacy within the context of the pandemic? And (b) what specific situational factors described by participants influence these perceptions?

First, findings related to initial barriers show that the move to an all-virtual modality at the beginning of the 2020 pandemic was marked, in many respects, by uncertainty. As this was the first time all nine participants had engaged in online teaching, it is unsurprising that several teachers experienced issues adapting traditional instruction and materials to an all-digital format. A study by Camilleri and Camilleri (2017) found that teachers may lack confidence in adapting traditional pedagogy without adequate and on-going training. Further, teacher efficacy to manage pedagogical shifts to virtual learning are linked to limiting situational uncertainty before a crisis event (Bolarin & Hernan, 2020). However, given the lack of infrastructure for an instructional shift, lower student engagement and the cancellation of state testing, participants in this study focused their efforts entirely on "a return to normal" for the following school year. Implications

for these findings show, the absence of preparation for an unexpected event, perceived teaching efficacy will be linked with a more traditional approach to instruction.

Most participants experienced myriad challenges in classroom management directly related to school policies guidelines. These challenges were physical, technological and social in nature and the impact on classroom management ranged from keeping students engaged, limiting distractions and keeping instruction at a steady pace. Findings within the structural barriers category relate to Bandura's (2006) theory of self-efficacy, specifically the concept of self-efficacy as being situationally dependent within an occupation. O'Niell and Stephenson (2011) found classroom management to be a distinct and significant factor to teacher perception of self-efficacy.

Of all physical safety measures, desk shields were recognized by all participants as limiting classroom accessibility and functionality, and four participants felt the presence of desk shields had a negative impact on behavior management. These findings are in line with Brophy's (1988) definition of specific classroom management tasks that refer to maintaining learning environments that are engaging and fully functional.

Classroom management tasks during this period of time were simultaneously split between two classrooms: physical and virtual. Regardless of how comfortable participants stated they felt using technology during instruction, all participants believed the hybrid model had more limitations than in-person instruction. Eight participants described lower levels of engagement with virtual students, while five gave specific examples of issues with student absenteeism. These findings are significant as rapport building through instruction (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) and continued connection with students are tied to positive learning outcomes (Hargreaves, 2000; Lasky, 2005). All participants related the hybrid teaching phase during the

pandemic to be the most stressful and frustrating. The reasons, as stated in the findings section and literature, are related to challenges to self-efficacy through classroom management and juggling many tasks at once (Bülow, 2022). This finding is significant as varied stressors in classroom management are linked to teacher burnout (Gholami, 2015) and teacher attrition (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

The finding that all participants felt a sense of satisfaction with in-building administrative efforts during the pandemic is interconnected with the grounded theme of “Accountability.” In this report, administrative support had many functions. Most notable were links drawn between participant agency and principal support. On a micro-level, individual agency is dependent upon on the social rules and materials offered by the larger, macro-level structure (Giddens, 1986). In terms of this study, participants felt their agency to foster student accountability for virtual students fell outside of their control. It wasn’t until administrative efforts to enforce the social norms and rules, like attendance policies and behavioral standards, did participants feel their agency to make a difference became influential in student performance. The implications for this study illustrate how administrative support through awareness of micro and macro-level dynamics within the public-school structure and can lead to teacher retention when reform policies are evaluated for their impact on educators (Valli & Buese, 2007). In support of this notion, this study found five participants directly linked their in-building administrative support during the pandemic to job satisfaction and professional retention.

Given the turbulent past two years in the field of education, and the narratives expressed in this study, a focus on administrative support systems from the perspectives of educators should be the top priority in managing teacher attrition and early retirement. In terms of secondary education, future research should examine perspectives from in-building

administrators and their experience implementing school reform and COVID-19 policies during the pandemic. Exploring the different group perspectives will shed light on the duality of micro and macro-level dynamics within public school structure. A focus on these implementation processes for educators of primary aged students should also be considered, as a majority of past literature on virtual learning modalities has been concentrated in higher education.

LIMITATIONS

While this study offers important contributions of educator perspectives to the literature on this unique time in education, it was not without limitations. Given the small sample size and limited participant recruitment, findings discussed in this report cannot be considered representative. While I attempted to recruit an equal number of participants from each grade level and subject, seventh grade and elective subjects were unrepresented. This is significant as this study showed participants expressed teaching subject and grade level as influencing self-efficacy perceptions. Another limitation to representativeness stems from the homogenous sample of participants and school characteristics. Because the majority of teachers sampled in this study were women and all participants were White and were employed in a non-titled suburban locale, I was unable to examine the interaction between these social phenomena and other demographic characteristics such as race, gender and socio-economic status. It should be noted that while seeking permission for this study required the consent of the principal as gatekeeper, the recruitment strategy from the school-wide email had the potential to bias the initial convenience sample of participants, as it could have been interpreted as request to participate by their employer, or skewed data toward more favorable perceptions of the school administration.

Furthermore, extensive variations in district policies and school response to the COVID-19 pandemic across the United States are likely to be a significant influencing factor on teacher experience during this time. Situated in the southeastern portion of the US, Prime School's response to COVID-19 health and safety protocols are completely different than other regions. Theorizing from my own findings, perception of administrative support and extended distance learning protocols are likely related in different ways to the literature on self-efficacy and teacher burnout and attrition. Future studies should investigate the influence these variable situations have on teacher perspectives across different regions and school types. Further, research should continue to focus on increasing awareness of diversity and ensuring access to resources to student and educator groups most at risk of falling behind or leaving the profession. A beneficial addition to literature on this topic would be the creation of a robust content analysis of mandated district policies and school characteristics per state during the 2019-2021 school years. The inclusion of mixed method approaches will offer greater insight into the initial endeavor to understand these phenomena.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this research are far reaching to our holistic understanding of the disruption and recovery from COVID-19. While past literature has shown administrative, instructional and emotional support can mitigate the increased stress on educators during the pandemic (Pressley, 2021), literature on the impact of policy-specific, professional demands and adoption strategies is limited. Through interviews with secondary-age teachers, these findings offer four categories of specific, influential factors that illustrate increased teaching-efficacy and workplace satisfaction are dependent on administrative support systems. Furthermore, all participants agreed that successfully managing instructional pedagogy during hybrid learning is

interconnected with social structures within their school; these include maintaining a connection with students and equitably distributed accountability measures. For these participants, this study has identified a clear relationship of influence between positive teaching-efficacy for educators and the agency of control they maintain over their learning environment in times of uncertainty.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocols for Teachers Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Can you provide information on:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Race
 - Years of experience teaching
 - Years teaching at this location
 - Grade level(s) taught
 - Subject(s) Taught

- Describe your initial experience of teaching during COVID-19.

- Describe your experience using and interacting with technology during the different phases of COVID-19

- Describe your experience teaching in your classroom during hybrid teaching.

- What were the protocols in place at this school during the different phases of the pandemic?

- Have you had to adapt or change your method of teaching in the time of COVID?
 - Did this change over time?

- Describe your engagement with your students during class time.
 - Did this change over time? If so, how?

- What were main challenges you faced in-person teaching during COVID-19?

- Did these challenges change over time?

- Did you feel supported as an educator teaching in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Has COVID-19 affected your experience with classroom management tasks?

- Do you feel there has been a return to what you consider a normal teaching experience?

- Has COVID-19 changed or impacted your relationship with administration at your school?