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Returning to School After a Pandemic: K-6 Special Education Teachers Perspectives on Students With Disabilities Returning to School in Regard to Mindset, Behavior, Social Connections, and Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Returning to School After a Pandemic: K-6 Special Education Teachers Perspectives on Students with Disabilities Returning to School in Regard to Mindset, Behavior, Social Connections, and Academic Achievement.

by Andrea Xenios

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on students with disabilities returning to school after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Methodology: This qualitative study interviewed 10 special education teachers who taught before, during, and after the pandemic in Orange County, CA. Semi-structured open ended interview questions was the main source of data collection with other sources including observations, and artifacts. Data was coded and the researcher analyzed the data for themes and patterns.

Findings: The study revealed students with disabilities experienced diminished self-efficacy skills during their time at home and returning to in-person learning. Educators have noticed how behaviors (task initiation, emotion regulation skills), and the lack of academic achievement during this period have impacted student self-efficacy skills. Additionally, educators expressed the need for growth mindset, positive structures, people, and environments to help nourish those self-efficacy skills.

Conclusions: This study supported the literature and affirming that self-efficacy serves as the basis for motivation and accomplishment. Self-Efficacy helps an individual overcome obstacles that may interfere with using one's abilities to achieve goals. When

a students' self-efficacy is impacted it can negatively impact their mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement.

Recommendations: The researcher recommends educators and districts incorporate growth mindset into their curriculum and classrooms, create Wellness Centers on campuses, and provide reading intervention programs for schools to provide for students who are not meeting grade level standards in the area of English Language Arts. These strategies should continue to help and support students with disabilities and enhance their self-efficacy skills since returning to campus.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the world that people once knew and lived in ceased to be a reality. At that time, the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the globe. Citizens all around the world felt the economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) 670 million people contracted COVID-19 and 6.82 million people succumbed to the virus. Throughout the first year of the pandemic numbers, started to drastically increase which caused major closures and shutdowns throughout the U.S. The U.S Government laid out guidelines for states and incoming citizens from other countries to help slow the spread of COVID-19 (The White House, n.d.). These guidelines consisted of travel restrictions, non-essential business closures, school closures, social distancing, facial masks, and vaccinations (World Health Organization, 2022). The effects of the pandemic had a lasting impact on the world, especially in the area of education.

The pandemic disrupted the educational system impacting students, educators, families, schools, and communities around the world (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). In addition, students experienced isolation, food and housing insecurity, and emotional distress, which resulted in an influx of problems in the areas of academic achievement and mental health (Basch et al., 2022). Recent studies (Basch et al., 2022; Rao & Fisher, 2021) have found education to be one of the most affected areas, creating bigger educational gaps among students. The education system had significant and unique challenges to navigate throughout the pandemic.

The education system endured impactful changes during this time (Basch et al., 2022; Rao & Fisher, 2021). In particular, the pandemic dramatically affected instructional

delivery. Schools responded by converting in-class instruction to remote learning, including special education classes (Ondrasek et al., 2021). Remote learning has existed for years and is utilized in many different settings. Remote learning can be effective and is often utilized for college or homeschooling (Khan et al., 2021). Students in special education classes had to adjust to remote learning and being engaged in front of a computer for most of the day. The directive to move to remote learning was challenging for special education teachers due to their hands-on lessons and activities, and lack of support staff. In special education classes, students typically receive support from their teacher along with classroom aides, which helps them stay seated, focused, and on task. During remote learning, special education students lost that vital extra in-person support (Steed & Leech, 2021). Lessons and activities have flexibility in a special education classroom, which also made remote learning challenging. During the pandemic, special education teachers found it difficult to sustain student attention, engagement, and work completion (Khan et al., 2021). It was especially difficult for special education teachers to modify lessons and find academic programs that would help keep their students engaged while at home.

Schools throughout California remained closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, with the 2020-2021 school year delivered through a distance learning model. However, schools in Orange County, California began to return to a hybrid form of instructional delivery in October 2020. The hybrid form of instructional delivery consisted of a limited number of students coming to campus for a few hours, then returning home to finish asynchronous work. Southern California schools differed from dates students returned to campus; however, back-to-school instruction began for the

2021-2022 school year (Ondrasek et al., 2021). Since the shutdowns in March 2020, special education teachers and students have returned to schools. Understanding K-6 special education teachers' experiences related to the effects of the pandemic can be helpful in supporting K-6 special education students and helping them to reengage and thrive in their schools.

Background

Pandemic Impacts on Education

The educational system endured one of the most impactful disruptions of all time during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dempsey et al., 2022). As the aftermath of the pandemic continued to unfold, reports have documented the effects on K-12 education. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), the pandemic negatively affected academic growth and created an increase in pre-existing disparities. Educators are worried that students have fallen behind pre-pandemic expectations. The U.S. Department of Education acknowledged the significant disruption students with disabilities faced during this time in regard to education and related aids and services. Certain school districts that are considered rural or high poverty also faced challenges with maintaining regular communication between teachers and students (Crow, 2022). Additionally, instructional minutes decreased from pre-pandemic norms in many schools across the globe (Gross & Opalka, 2020). In particular, students and teachers faced a variety of challenges and repercussions resulting from the pandemic.

Teaching During the Pandemic

Teachers nationwide had to quickly convert their classroom lessons to online platforms (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Academic lessons, activities, group

projects, quizzes, tests, and physical education all had to be converted for students to access remotely. A big hurdle that teachers faced during this time was student engagement and how to keep students engaged for long periods of time (Schreiber, 2022). According to Mahoney (2020), teachers expressed that remote learning was not a sufficient substitute for direct instruction with teachers and students. Many students had their cameras off, would not participate in lessons or discussions, and had a difficult time sitting in front of the computer for an extended amount of time. Due to the unfamiliarity of remote learning, many teachers reverted to asynchronous work for part of the day. Asynchronous work consists of students completing worksheets, activities, videos, readings, or quizzes on their own time.

Another study found that teachers had difficulty with remote learning due to the lack of training and resources provided during the transition (Bubb & Jones, 2020). Undoubtedly, many teachers were not prepared and did not have the knowledge or skill set for the transition to remote learning. Specifically, teachers who taught special populations struggled with the transition and their instructional delivery (Khan et al., 2021).

Effects of Remote Learning on Academic Achievement

Learning was greatly affected by the pandemic. According to a nationally representative survey conducted in May 2020,

> Only 15% of districts expected their elementary students to be receiving instruction for more than four hours per day during remote learning, while 85% of districts expected instructional time to dip under four hours- more than an hour

> per day less than the pre-pandemic national average of five instructional hours per day. (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 2)

Students were receiving less instructional hours during remote learning, which contributed to the widening achievement gap as well as learning loss (Crow, 2022). Over the course of the time students were participating in remote learning, instructional hours were not fulfilling pre-pandemic standards. Emerging evidence has shown that students in some grades are currently falling behind in the areas of math and reading when compared to pre-pandemic expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Another analysis found that students are approximately three months behind in math and one and a half months behind in reading (Dorn et al., 2020). Studies and statistics have found that academics are an area of concern for students and further research is needed on how to help support these students returning to school.

Effects of Remote Learning on Mental Health and Behavior

The pandemic brought grief, loss, and isolation for a period of time, which affected mental health and behavior among students. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) reported that most students experienced mental health challenges to their overall well-being. Many students also lost access to school-based services and support during the pandemic. Schools also saw an influx of gender identity-based harassment and violence that targeted specific students within the community. In a Gallup Poll that was given in May 2020, 45% of parents said their child was experiencing harm to their mental health, citing disconnection from teachers and classmates as a “major challenge” (Calderon, 2020, p. 2).

This period of time was especially hard for students because they were not able to play or engage socially with their friends while learning remotely. Many educators believed the lack of social interaction among their students would hinder their social skills development (DeArmond et al., 2021). Reports from the 2020-2021 school year, indicated that teachers and parents continued to see students struggling with social and emotional well-being, particularly those students who were still learning from home (Brundin, 2021). A national survey was sent out to parents in March 2021 that found more than 10,000 high school students had an increase in stress and decrease in engagement, and 46% of parents thought their teens were more depressed and anxious (Fagell, 2021). Students fully returned to school in 2022 and reports have indicated that social competence has decreased and students are needing extra supports in the areas of mental health and behavior (Brundin, 2021).

Remote Learning Effects on Special Education

The transition to remote learning was challenging for special education teachers. One of the challenges these educators faced was addressing their special education needs remotely (Asbury et al., 2020). Different needs included flexible seating, hands on assistance, and access to related services. In addition, many online platforms are not compatible with assistive technology, which made remote instruction difficult (Hills, 2020). Asbury et al. (2020) found that educators also struggled with meeting Individualized Education Plan (IEP) minutes and addressing social emotional goals. In the spring of 2020 when schools shut down, service providers such as occupational therapists and adaptive physical education teachers were not able to service or meet the students' IEP service minutes. Students and families who depended on these educational

services were suddenly not receiving them. Special education teachers really had to think about their instruction delivery and which method(s) would work the best for their students. In a poll conducted by the *Washington Post*, a portion of parents claimed the virtual learning sessions were ineffective, so they did not make their child attend (Stein & Strauss, 2020).

Teachers who teach special education teach not only academics but also life skills to their students. During remote learning, teachers were not able to assist with this type of learning, and parents noticed a drastic change in the way their children held their pencils, used scissors, walked, sat in a chair, and wrote (Stein & Strauss, 2020). Likewise, students in special education suffered from regression in social, behavioral, verbal, and academic areas, adding to the disparity in education and among students. Teachers had to rely on help from parents during remote learning. Some parents spent hours alongside their students assisting them with activities and/or coursework, whereas other parents had to prioritize work, food security, and illness, making school a lower priority (Ray, 2020).

Theoretical Foundations

The four theoretical foundations that support this research include situational crisis communication theory, social disruption theory, educational productivity theory, and social learning theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Timothy W. Coombs (2016) proposed his theory on situational crisis communication in 2007. This theory addresses crisis communication and managing crisis response through different strategies. In relation to the pandemic and school closures, school districts had to manage crisis communication and response with their students and

families. School districts responded to the pandemic with remote learning to help keep students and their families safe and still provide academic instruction through this national crisis.

Social Disruption Theory

Social disruption theory focuses on disruptions and how individuals must come together to address those disruptions (Arnold, 2012). Social disruptions can include sickness, diseases, or injuries. Arnold (2012) stated that a lack of engagement from the community can hinder intervention plans. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a social disruption that disrupted the lives of educators and students worldwide.

Educational Productivity Theory

Herbert Walberg's (1984) theory focused on students' psychological characteristics and psychological environment, implying that these two psychological components influence education. Walberg identified nine factors that fall within three groups: characteristics of students, instruction, and psychological environment. Each of these factors appears to be a necessary component for learning.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura developed social learning theory, which states that social behavior is learned by observing others, and emphasizes observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors of others (McLeod, 2016). This theory also takes into consideration the environmental and cognitive factors that may affect learning and behavior. Remote learning challenged this theory in regard to observing, modeling, and imitating behaviors. Due to students being remote, they were not able to receive hands-on experiences, which may have affected their learning and behavior.

Theoretical Framework

The current research is based on Albert Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which focuses on the importance of one's perceptions of one's capabilities in determining successful outcomes. Bandura asserted that people's self-efficacy acts as a foundation for motivation, and success, and aids in controlling their actions. Individuals with high self-efficacy reap benefits such as resiliency, academic achievement, increased work performance, and healthy habits (Lopez-Garrido, 2023).

Self-efficacy theory created a foundation for the research in regard to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve a goal or complete a task (Bandura, 1977). The researcher applied Bandura's theory in creating the purpose of the study, which helped guide the interview questions. The framework was believed to be the most relevant when examining K-6 special education teacher's perceptions of special education students returning to school in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections. Utilizing Bandura's framework allowed the researcher to analyze student self-efficacy after the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures to determine the effect the pandemic had on student self-efficacy as perceived by teachers.

Statement of the Research Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the educational system in different ways. School districts are continuing to see the trickling impact of remote learning and social distancing (Grossman et al., 2022). This phenomenon was a recent event; therefore, research is still emerging. Some studies have examined the effects of remote learning on academic achievement and mental health, finding both of these areas to be significantly affected (Crow, 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020). Evidence indicates that

a percentage of students are falling behind in the areas of reading and math when compared to pre-pandemic expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

In California, the Smarter Balanced Assessment from spring of 2022 indicates a decline in English Language Arts (ELA) and math test scores across the state. California saw an overall decrease in academic performance. Northern California school districts experienced a decline in scores ranging from 2.91-8.18% (De La Cruz, 2022). Schools in high poverty areas experienced higher percentages of learning loss among students. This was due to these types of schools staying remote for longer periods of time, adding to the amount of learning they missed (Turner, 2022). Turner (2022) stated that schools in high poverty areas stayed remote for a longer duration of the 2020-2021 school year indicating these students missed roughly 22 weeks of in-person math.

Reports indicate students' overall mental health and behavior was significantly affected, indicating that students experienced major challenges during remote learning (Brundin, 2021; Calderon, 2020; DeArmond et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Many students felt isolated and stressed and experienced low satisfaction. Students who normally did not experience difficulties with their mental health did during remote learning. Researchers with UC Davis collected data from 1,265 adolescents and found that students experienced high levels of dissatisfaction, isolation, and an increase in mental health problems during remote learning (Nikos-Rose, 2022). The findings indicated that schools' interventions are necessary in supporting students moving forward.

Studies have examined the effects of remote learning on students in special education. Asbury et al. (2020) found that special education teachers had a challenging

time addressing their students' IEPs and delivering the students service minutes. Teachers also had difficulty engaging their students, managing behaviors, and ensuring work completion (Hills, 2020). Many special education educators are wondering where they should go from here. Students have returned to in-person school as usual; however, education in the K-6 classroom for mild to moderate special education students is not the same and educators are trying to help support their students as best they can (Ray, 2020).

There is a gap in research regarding special education students returning to school after the pandemic. Issues such as the severity of learning loss, behavioral issues, and mental health challenges among special education students returning to school remain unquantified (Ray, 2020). Special education teachers witnessed the academic and social emotional impacts on children as they struggled to engage in online learning. Further, teachers have also dealt with the aftereffects of the pandemic on students with special needs, including learning loss, lack of access to critical therapies, behavioral changes, stress, and various mental health problems (McDonald, 2022). Although special education teachers experienced the impact of the pandemic on children, little research has been conducted regarding how teachers perceive the pandemic affected their students' education. Gaining perspectives from special education teachers after the pandemic can provide a deeper understanding of how the pandemic affected disabled students' mental health and learning. It is clear that the pandemic negatively affected student learning and disproportionately affected disabled children (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021). Learning how teachers perceive the pandemic affected vulnerable children can provide insights that can be used to help them recover what was lost and help them prosper in the future.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on students with disabilities returning to school after being online after the COVID-19 pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Research Questions

1. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?
3. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Significance of the Problem

The overall impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and mental health have affected thousands however the severity is still unknown. Students of all ages and abilities were affected. A report found that students with disabilities, approximately 14% of all U.S. students, suffered from disproportionate effects during remote learning (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021). In addition, Morando-Rhim and Ekin (2021) gathered anecdotal reports and found that students who received extensive supports and services pre-pandemic have regressed during those months of remote learning.

The combination of academic regression and behavior regression have significantly affected students with disabilities. Quantitative data has been collected, providing evidence of the effects of the pandemic on education such as learning loss, mental health problems, and a widening achievement gap among students (Asbury et al., 2020; Calderon, 2020; Crow, 2022; Fagell, 202; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Concerns among educators and policymakers continue to grow regarding the learning loss that students experienced during the pandemic. A recent poll found that 56.6% of in-person teachers and 75.2% of hybrid/online teachers stated that their students learned less during the pandemic (McDonald, 2022).

Instructional delivery during remote learning was different compared to in-person learning. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) reported,

> 15% of districts expected their elementary students to be receiving instruction for more than four hours per day during remote learning, while 85% of districts expected instructional time to dip under four hours- more than an hour per day less than the pre-pandemic national average of five instructional hours per day. (p. 2)

Students were not receiving their full educational minutes when compared to pre-pandemic minutes. Stein and Strauss (2020) reported that students with disabilities also experienced a decrease in educational minutes as well as an interruption in related services (speech services, adaptive physical education, physical therapy, occupational therapy). In a poll conducted by the *Washington Post*, a portion of parents claimed the virtual learning sessions were ineffective so they did not make their child attend. In May 2020, a Facebook poll asked 1,594 parents if their child was receiving services through

IEP during remote learning, 20% said their child was receiving services and 39% of parents claimed their child was not receiving any services (Parents Together Foundation, 2020).

In addition to learning loss, students are in need of mental health supports. Students with disabilities encountered mental health struggles during remote learning. Many students receive social emotional support through their IEPs but were not receiving these supports, such as individual counseling, group counseling, or social groups (Stein & Strauss, 2020). A combination of parent interviews found that parents noticed changes in their child's behavior, including anxiety, tantrums, and withdrawal (Averett, 2021). Dorn et al. (2020) claimed that the trauma students endured from the COVID-19 pandemic will affect students for years to come.

This study focused on perceptions of special education educators on the effects of special education students returning to school after the pandemic. These perceptions are imperative for future crises as well as how educators respond with instruction and mental health supports. Special education educators taught these students during the pandemic and have returned to school with them. This study can build an understanding of the academic performance and mental health of special education students returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic. This information is vital so that special education educators can better understand how these students were affected during the pandemic. In addition, it will give special education educators insight into specific academic and mental health areas in which students need to be supported. This will allow these educators to tailor their instructional delivery, classroom supports, or social emotional curriculum to meet their students' needs. It is also imperative that principals, teachers,

support staff, and educational partners utilize these research results for future academic, behavioral, and social emotional learning programs. It is equally important for state and federal policymakers as they develop future legislation, regulations, or guidance for school districts post-pandemic.

Definitions

For purposes of clarity and understanding the following definitions are provided for several terms that are used frequently throughout this research:

- *Academic Achievement:* From content standards, the academic knowledge, behaviors, and skills students are expected to learn and demonstrate in a performance task (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).
- *Behavior:* A way of learning allowing people to learn from the experience of what others are doing and evaluating their own behavior; within the classroom, students are academically engaged, respectful, and/or disruptive and learn those behaviors by observing their peers (Bandura, 1977).
- *COVID-19:* A contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2. The symptoms range from mild to severe illness (CDC, 2022).
- *Fixed Mindset:* Belief that one's competence and talent are traits and do not change (Transforming Education, 2020a).
- *Growth Mindset:* Belief that ability can change as a result of effort, perseverance, and practice (Transforming Education, 2020a).
- *Individualized Education Plan (IEP):* A legal document that is developed for each child in the United States who qualifies for and requires special education services. This document is created by a team of members

comprising parents, teacher, administrator, psychologist, and related service providers who are knowledgeable of the students' needs. This document highlights school and program accommodations, services, and goals related to the services being provided (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

- *Mild to Moderate Special Education:* Students with mild to moderate disabilities ranging from intellectual and development disabilities, specific learning disabilities, other health impairments, or emotional disturbances in grades K-12 (California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, 2023).
- *Mindset:* The positive impact words have on someone; telling a child they are capable and can face any challenge ahead of them can encourage and motivate them by growing belief in their own ability to succeed (Bandura, 1977).
- *Pandemic:* A worldwide outbreak and the spread of a new disease affecting many people (CDC, 2021).
- *Self-Efficacy:* A belief in one's ability to act in ways that are necessary in order to reach specific goals. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in an individual's motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1977).
- *Social Connections:* The relationships and interactions you have with people around you such as family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, or more distant people you may casually interact with. (Moulton, 2023).

Delimitations

In all research, delimitations are boundaries that are set by the researcher for the study in question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). This study was delimited to 10 K-6

special education teachers who taught mild to moderate special education classes before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Orange County, California.

Organization of the Study

This study is made up of five chapters, as well as a list of references and appendices. Chapter I introduced the COVID-19 pandemic and the worldwide effects it had, especially on education. Remote learning, teaching during remote learning, and teaching special education during remote learning were addressed. Additionally, Chapter I stated the problem statement, purpose, research questions, definitions, and delimitations to the study. Chapter II expanded on the ideas presented in Chapter I and reviewed the current literature related to COVID-19, worldwide effects of the pandemic, effects of remote learning on academic achievement and behavior, teaching special education during remote learning, returning to school post-pandemic, and self-efficacy in education. Chapter III highlights the research design, methodology, population, sample, and limitations. Chapter IV focuses on the analysis of the data collected and provides a discussion of the findings. Lastly, Chapter V summarizes the study and data and from that the researcher draws conclusions and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will address the COVID-19 pandemic, disruption in education, remote learning, and the effects of remote learning on academic achievement, mental health, and behavior. Theoretical foundations include situational crisis theory, crisis response theory, educational productivity theory, social learning theory, and the theoretical framework of self-efficacy to examine the perceptions of special education educators on students returning to school post-pandemic.

Review of the Literature

COVID-19

Over 670 million people contracted COVID-19, and over 6.82 million people died. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global outbreak of the coronavirus, a highly infectious disease that attacks the respiratory system and can be transmitted through air (World Health Organization, 2023). Presentation of the disease ranged from asymptomatic to deadly, with symptoms including fever, cough, and fatigue (CDC, 2022). In December of 2019 the first case of coronavirus was found in Wuhan, China, and then quickly spread to other countries (World Health Organization, 2022).

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization flagged a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization labeled the outbreak a pandemic, and declared a global emergency. Common public health limitations during this time included non-essential business closures, travel restrictions, lockdowns, mask mandates, quarantines, and testing (World Health Organization, 2022). The pandemic triggered social and economic disruption around the world. In addition, there were widespread supply shortages and reduced

human activity and interaction. Some individuals were directed to work from home and thousands of people lost their jobs, over-affecting unemployment benefits (CDC, 2022).

Social disruptions were amplified, causing major concerns. The orders from the United States Government and World Health Organization for social distancing led to an influx of mental health problems such as social anxiety, panic, stress, and insecurity, as well as crimes such as theft, fraud, and domestic disputes. The Secretary General of the United Nations expressed concern about an increase in domestic violence cases and abuse cases involving children, spouses, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). Distribution of drugs and alcohol consumption increased, as well as the sale and purchases of firearms (Panzeri et al., 2020). Some individuals used drugs and alcohol to diminish their fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic. Social distancing also affected prisons across the country, forcing facilities to release inmates, which heightened anxiety among communities (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). The pandemic has created many lifestyle changes and a great deal of economic unrest.

According to the World Bank (2022), the pandemic triggered one of the largest global economic crises in more than a century. The world endured economic challenges that included people losing their jobs, high unemployment rates, widespread supply shortages, business closures, and shutdowns (Klein & Smith, 2021). This led to a global impact of inequality among disadvantaged individuals. Temporary unemployment was higher for workers with a high school education in 70% of countries. Jobs in the beauty industry such as (hairstylists, manicurists, estheticians, massage therapists) were affected by lockdowns and social distancing directives (The World Bank, 2022). Households,

businesses, and institutions around the world were financially affected and are slowly recovering.

The institution that is the focus of this study, schools, faced their own challenges. Many educational institutions were fully or partially closed due to the pandemic (CDC, 2022). On March 13, 2020 schools around the world were given a directive to shut down (World Health Organization, 2023). This directive from the government forced schools to shift their instruction delivery remotely, posing many challenges for educators, students, and families around the world.

Disruption in Education

COVID-19 caused a major disruption within the educational system across the U.S. More than 1.5 billion students were affected worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Specific disruptions in education included school closures; shifts between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning; pauses on extracurricular activities; and minimal interpersonal interactions (Moulton, 2023). During this time, students had limited options for instructional delivery, social activities, and interactions. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) offered evidence of how negatively the pandemic has affected academic growth, widening the pre-existing disparity among students.

The majority of students suffered mental health challenges and lost access to school based services and supports as a result of the pandemic and its consequences (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). During this time students, were more likely to develop stress, increase in behaviors, and PTSD (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). In addition, students with disabilities experienced a significant disruption in their education and related aids and services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). A parent survey conducted in August

2020 found that most students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) did not receive their related services or service minutes during remote learning (Stein & Strauss, 2020). Parents indicated that students were not receiving services; however, high school graduation rates were not affected due to an assembly bill that allowed students to receive passing scores for the 2019-2020 school year. During the 2020-2021 school year, graduation rates dipped slightly due to schools returning to pre-pandemic standards (Turner, 2022).

Schools shifted to remote learning because of a directive from the U.S. Government and the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2023) that forced school districts to deliver their instruction remotely using video conferencing programs like Zoom and Google Meet. Many students and teachers had difficulty accessing online education tools, had limited internet access in underdeveloped areas, and had limited access to laptops and/or cell phones (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). Research conducted by Cullinane and Montacute (2020) found that students from low socioeconomic status households were least likely to have access to devices and needed internet access at home. These difficulties posed many challenges for both students and teachers.

Since the pandemic, recent studies on remote learning have explored the advantages and disadvantages of this delivery method for students (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Steed & Leech, 2021). Researchers from UCLA conducted a student survey and found that 70% of students had difficulty understanding and completing classwork as well as finding someone to help them with their homework during remote learning (McDonald, 2022). However, other research found “an increase in the autonomy of pupils to manage

their own learning" was an unexpected benefit of home-school (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020, p. 5). Additionally, a survey of primary teachers found that 73% of teachers had more time to plan their lessons (Larsen, 2020).

Teaching During The Pandemic

The pandemic created a need for educators to transition their lessons into a hybrid or fully online format. Nguyen (2015) found that online learning can be just as effective as in-person learning; however, some concerns may arise over the unknown of technology among instructors. One of the biggest concerns among educators was accessing online curriculum and keeping students engaged remotely (Schreiber, 2022). According to Mahoney (2020) teachers expressed frustration with remote learning, emphasizing that it was not a sufficient alternative to in-person learning. Many teachers experienced students who had their cameras off, did not participate, and had difficulty sitting in front of the computer for long periods of time. Due to the unfamiliarity of remote learning, many teachers reverted to asynchronous work for part of the day.

Schreiber (2022) described three evidence-based approaches to asynchronous instruction: content recordings, guided note taking, and self-explanation. Utilizing these approaches can help support an inclusive framework for students and teachers that helps to facilitate learning skills, decrease content load, and enhance accessibility.

Bubb and Jones (2020) found teachers that struggled with remote education due to the lack of training and resources provided during this transition. Teachers voiced concerns about delivering high quality teaching remotely due to a lack of experience and knowledge with these type of video conferencing programs. However, schools that did

incorporate an online learning platform had higher student engagement (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2020).

A national survey conducted in Norway (Federici & Vika, 2020) reported that 85% of educators reported that they were able to provide an effective and safe learning environment, and had good contact with students and their families. Educators felt they provided an effective and safe learning environment.

Effects of Remote Learning on Academic Achievement

Academic achievement examines academic outcomes to determine whether or not students have achieved their learning goals or met state standards (Steinmayr et al., 2020). When schools first shut down in March of 2020, 17% of districts surveyed had given directives to their educators to review concepts and skills that had already been taught (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This means that during the spring of 2020, many students did not learn new concepts or skills that would have normally been taught in the classroom that term. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), 85% of districts knew that instructional time would decrease to under 4 daily hours of instruction, equaling greater than an hour less per day of instruction than the pre-pandemic national average of 5 hours of instruction per day. In other words, students were receiving less instructional minutes during remote learning. This lack of instruction has contributed to the widening achievement gap and learning loss among students (Crow, 2022).

Emerging evidence has shown that students in some grades were falling behind in the areas of math and reading when compared to pre-pandemic expectations (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). McKinsey & Company (Dorn et al., 2020) found that

students "learned 67% of the math and 87% of the reading that grade level students would have typically learned during the initial shut down in March 2020" (p. 2). According to those numbers when compared to data from fall 2020, students are approximately 3 months behind in math and 1.5 months behind in reading.

Researchers at UCLA conducted a study investigating the perspectives of K-12 students and teachers during remote learning and found that a majority of the students said they learned more during the pandemic; however, two-thirds of teachers surveyed thought their students learned less (McDonald, 2022). Data from winter 2021 using the Renaissance Start Assessment found that some students experienced some learning loss, although late elementary to early middle school students were found to be 8-11 weeks behind in math and 6-10 weeks behind in reading (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Overall, research has seen an impact on students' academic achievement during the pandemic in addition to mental health challenges.

Effects of Remote Learning on Mental Health and Behavior

The shift to remote learning had an impact on students' mental health and behavior. During the pandemic, students experienced heightened emotions, including grief, loss, isolation, depression, and anxiety. The U.S. Department of Education (2022) reported that a majority of students experienced mental health challenges that affected their overall wellbeing. Students lost access to school-based mental health services and supports. Additionally, K-12 and post-secondary girls as well as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming students reported an increase in sexual harassment, violence, and online harassment. The pandemic brought an increase in identity-based harassment and violence to Asian American and Pacific Islander students, affecting their access to

educational opportunities and supports such as extracurricular clubs, sports, tutoring, and mental health services.

In a Gallup Poll conducted in May 2020, 45% of parents said their child was experiencing harm to their mental health, reporting disconnection from teachers and classmates as a "major challenge" (Calderon, 2020, p. 2). A national survey sent to parents in March 2021 found that more than 10,000 high school students experienced an increase in stress and decrease in engagement, and 46% of parents thought their teens were more depressed and anxious (Fagell, 2021). Educators believed the lack of social interaction among peers that occurred as a result of the pandemic would hinder social skills development (DeArmond et al., 2021). Reports from the 2020-2021 school year indicate that teachers and parents did in fact witness students struggling with social and emotional well-being, specifically those students who were still learning from home (Brundin, 2021).

Hill et al. (2020) conducted a study analyzing suicidal ideation rates among students ranging from ages 11-21 in a pediatric emergency department from January to July 2020, comparing them to rates from January to July 2019, and found a significantly higher suicide ideation rate in 2020. Additionally, students and parents reported an overwhelming increase in negative feelings among students during the pandemic; parents claimed their students' social and emotional wellbeing were at risk (Leeb et al., 2020). A national survey conducted in June 2020 found that half of the parents surveyed reported mental and behavioral challenges with their child, and 70% of children surveyed reported experiencing an increase in negative feelings of being overwhelmed, sad, or worried (Patrick et al., 2020). A study conducted by Brundin (2021) stated that eating disorders

were at an all-time high among students in Denver, Colorado during remote learning. According to a study by Verlenden et al. (2021),

> Parents of children receiving virtual instruction were more likely than were parents of children receiving in-person instruction to report that their children experienced decreased physical activity (62.9% versus 30.3%), time spent outside (58.0% versus 27.4%), in-person time with friends (86.2% versus 69.5%), virtual time with friends (24.3% versus 12.6%), and worsened mental or emotional health (24.9% versus 15.9%). (p. 371)

In contrast, some students thrived with remote learning, reporting that they could get more sleep and get snacks whenever they needed. Since students returned to school fully in 2022, reports have indicated that social competence has decreased and students are needing extra supports in the areas of mental health and behavior (Brundin, 2021).

Effects of Remote Learning on Special Education

The transition to remote learning was especially challenging for students with disabilities. California provides educational services to approximately 700,000 students with special educational needs (Gao & Hill, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students with disabilities received less help, support, and experienced teachers. Students with disabilities require more time and resources in order to participate actively in the learning environment. They may require assistance such as specialty equipment, materials, supports (UNESCO, 2020), flexible seating, hands on assistance, and access to related services. Many online platforms were not compatible with assistive technology, which posed another challenge for students who used these devices (Hills, 2020). One specific type of learning that is prevalent among students with disabilities is project-based

learning, which helps to improve self-esteem and engagement; however, due to being remote, this evidence-based learning format was challenging to use so, most special education educators did not incorporate it into their lessons or activities (UNESCO, 2020).

Asbury et al. (2020) found that educators also struggled to meet IEP minutes and address social emotional goals during the pandemic. In spring 2020 when schools shut down, students suddenly stopped receiving services such as occupational therapy or adaptive physical education; therefore, IEP service minutes were not being met, leaving schools and districts out of compliance with the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. Special education teachers and service providers needed to come up with a plan to determine how they could best serve these students and meet their needs. In a poll conducted in August 2020 by the *Washington Post*, half of parents claimed the virtual learning sessions were ineffective, so they did not make their child attend (Stein & Strauss, 2020). During the pandemic, special education teachers relied heavily on support from parents during instructional time. Some parents spent hours alongside their children, assisting them with activities and/or coursework, whereas other parents had to prioritize work, food security, and illness, making school a lower priority (Ray, 2020).

While being remote, teachers were not able to assist as much as they would have in the classroom meanwhile parents reported drastic changes in the way their child held their pencils, used scissors, walked, sat in a chair, and wrote (Stein & Strauss, 2020). During remote learning, students lost the extra in-person support that helps them stay seated, focused, and on task. Lessons and activities normally have flexibility in a special education classroom, which made being remote challenging. According to a study by

Khan et al. (2021), special education teachers found it difficult to sustain student attention, engagement, and work completion. It was difficult for educators who taught special education to modify lessons and find academic programs that would help keep their students engaged while at home. Ray (2020) stated that students in special education suffered from regression in social, behavioral, verbal, and academic areas, adding to the disparity in education and among students.

In further understanding special education teachers' perceptions of students returning to school post-pandemic, it is imperative to review existing theories in order to gain a conceptual base for conducting the proposed research study. Theoretical foundations provide a foundation of knowledge, serving as a structural support for the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Theoretical foundations help individuals understand certain phenomena and their relationships, as well as the theory behind these evidence-based explanations.

Theoretical Foundation

In most studies, researchers rely heavily on previous theories to help guide and ground their research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This practice provides a foundation for the researcher and reader in understanding the purpose of the research. Four theoretical foundations were utilized in this study a foundation: include situational crisis communication theory, social disruption theory, educational productivity theory, and social learning theory. As a more focused theoretical framework for this study, the researcher utilized Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which helped guide the development of the research study.

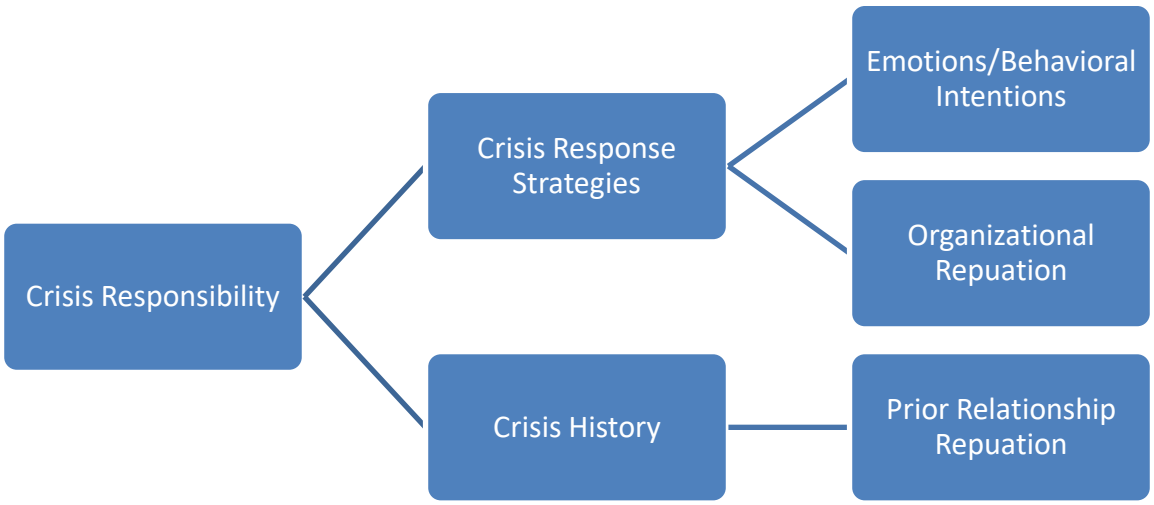
Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Proposed by W. Timothy Coombs in 2007, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) focuses on crisis communication and how crisis managers should navigate the crisis response using different strategies (Coombs, 2007). SCCT provides a framework for leaders and/or managers in understanding how individuals would behave and respond during a crisis. Coombs (2007) believed this theory was important due to the impact of crises on stakeholder communication and interaction within an organization. During a crisis it is imperative that stakeholders, leaders, and/or managers follow an evidence-based approach for communication and decision-making versus personal preference (Rousseau, 2006). While developing this framework, Coombs (2007) relied heavily on experimental methods as opposed to case studies.

SCCT can be applied to any organizational setting that is/was experiencing a crisis. SCCT is rooted in attribution theory, which theorizes a person's response for an action which in turn will experience an emotional reaction such as anger, or sympathy (Weiner, 2006). Attribution theory helps support the relationship between variables in SCCT. Figure 1 provides a visual example of the crisis situation model developed from SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Figure 1

Crisis Situation Model of SCCT



Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," 2007, by W. Coombs, *Corporate Reputation Review, 10,* 163–176. Copyright 2007 by the author.

SCCT expands on attribution theory in regard to the reputational threat posed by a crisis and facilitates crisis response strategies to help protect reputational assets. Attribution theory connects crisis situations and crisis responses. The attribution of responsibility helped shape the foundation for SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Based on empirical evidence to support his theory, Coombs (2007) created a crisis response strategy guideline that helps crisis managers assess and respond to crises (see Table 1). These guidelines allow crisis managers to make informed, strategic, and beneficial decisions during a crisis.

Table 1

SCCT Crisis Response Strategy Guidelines

1. Informing and adjusting information alone can be enough when crises have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises), no history of similar crises and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
2. Victimage can be used as part of the response for workplace violence, product tampering, natural disasters and rumors.
3. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (victim crises) coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
4. Diminish crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), which have no history of similar crises, and a neutral or positive prior relationship reputation.
5. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility (accident crises), coupled with a history of similar crises and/or negative prior relationship reputation.
6. Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used for crises with strong attributions of crisis responsibility (preventable crises) regardless of crisis history or prior relationship reputation.
7. The deny posture crisis response strategies should be used for rumor and challenge crises, when possible.
8. Maintain consistency in crisis response strategies. Mixing deny crisis response strategies with either the diminish or rebuild strategies will erode the effectiveness of the overall response.

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," 2007, by W. Coombs *Corporate Reputation Review 10*, 163–176. Copyright 2007 by the author.

Coombs (2007) emphasized that the key to determining an effective crisis response strategy is understanding the crisis and the amount of reputational threat caused by the crisis. Reputational threat is caused by initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation. Reputational threat refers to the damage a crisis can do to an organization if nothing is done to address it (Weiner, 2006). Through his research, Coombs (2007) identified three different types of crises: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the intentional cluster. Table 2 outlines these clusters.

Table 2

SCCT Crisis Type Clusters

Victim Cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.
(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility=Mild reputational threat)
Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.
Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.
Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.
Product tampering/malevolence: external agent causes damage to an organization.
Accidental Cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading the crisis were unintentional.
(Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility= Moderate reputational threat)
Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.
Technical error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.
Technical error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.
Intentional Cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated laws/regulation.
(Strong attributions of crisis responsibility= severe reputational threat)
Human error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.
Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.
Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.
Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.
Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," 2007, by W. Coombs, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *10*, 163–176. Copyright 2007 by the author.

Once the crisis is identified, leaders can predict how much attribution would be placed on the organization and the reputational threat it is facing (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Therefore, crisis communication decisions made by leaders and/or managers can have negative or positive effects on an organization if they are not worked through strategically (Coombs, 2007).

Social Disruption Theory

Social disruption theory focuses on disruptive events and how individuals must come together to address those disruptions (Arnold, 2012). Social disruption is a term from sociology that refers to a change in social life within a community setting (Park & Stokowski, 2009). In 2012, Colonel Damon T. Arnold (2012) offered his theory on social disruption and how these societal dynamics can affect a community. Regardless of race, origin, and ethnicity, for all people, sickness, diseases, or injuries can affect both individual and collective behaviors. Social disruptions can have a tremendous impact on a community; therefore, it is crucial for communities to come together and work through social disruptions together.

When a community faces a disruption, it may be viewed as having a limited or isolated impact on the community. In explaining his rationale for social disruption theory, Arnold (2012) used the example of obesity and how it affects both national and domestic affairs. Obesity it affects our health care systems at the national level and affects families at the domestic level. According to Arnold, a lack of engagement from the community can hinder intervention plans. It is imperative that when a community faces a social disruption, they come together to combat it.

Arnold's (2012) framework for social disruption theory "uses conceptual models to serve as a lens for looking at human adaptation, perception, and habituation over time and the implications for an individual as well as a collective community" (p. 3). Arnold asserted that behavioral choices are made daily based on concepts related to his underlying framework, the theory of social disruption.

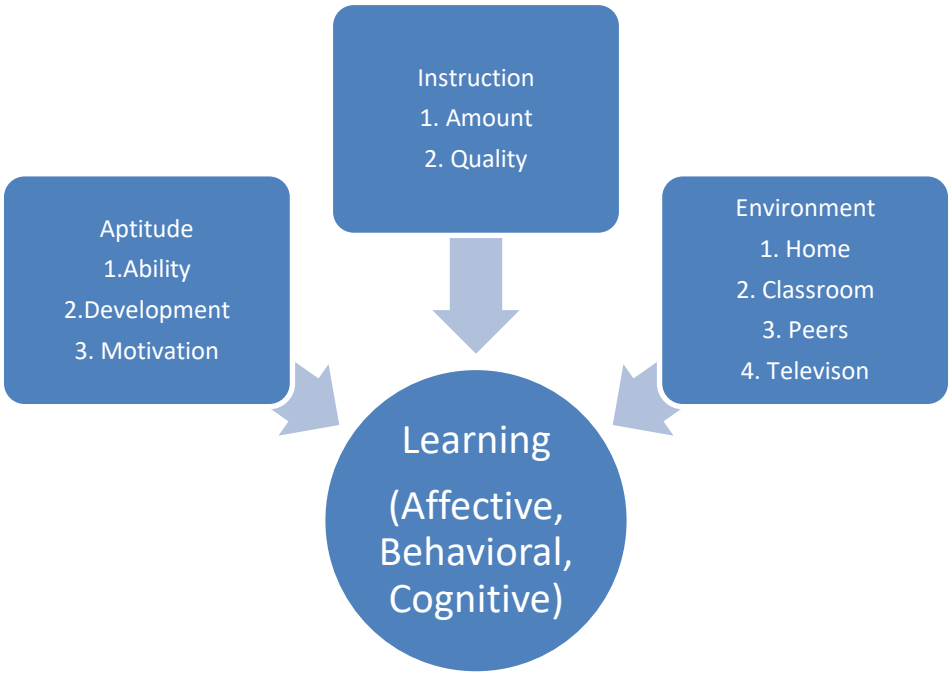
Educational Productivity Theory

In 1981, Herbert Walberg theorized about educational productivity, offering one of the first theories based on academic achievement to be tested empirically (McGrew, 2008). Walberg (1984) theorized that students' psychological characteristics and environment influenced their educational performance. Through his research, Walberg identified nine different factors that he linked to "increase[d] affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning" (p. 20). The nine factors were divided into three groups. The first group consisted of student aptitude, which included ability or prior achievement measured by standardized tests, development indicated by chronological age, and motivation or self-concepts. The second group focuses on instruction, which includes student engagement and quality instruction. Lastly, the third group encompasses environmental factors, such as home, classroom, community, peers, and television. Figure 2 highlights the myriad influences on student learning.

Walberg (1981) believed that a student needed a small amount of each factor listed in order to learn. The first five factors are influenced by educators, motivation is influenced by parents and students themselves, and the last three factors are influenced by psychological factors, including peers, the classroom, and the home. If one of these factors is affected, it can have an overall effect on a student and their learning abilities (Walberg, 1984). Educational productivity theory is a simplified theory for understanding student learning "due to many other factors impacting learning such as economic, sociological, and political forces at the school, community, state, and national levels" (Walberg, 1984, pp. 21-22).

Figure 2

Casual Influences on Student Learning



Note. Adapted from "Improving the Productivity of America's Schools," 1984, by H. Walberg, *Educational Leadership, 41*(8), 19-27. Copyright 1984 by the author.

Social Learning Theory

In 1977, Albert Bandura proposed his social learning theory, which focuses on the "importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others" (McLeod, 2016, p. 1). This theory was supported by Bandura's Bobo doll experiments, which demonstrated that children can learn social behavior like aggression through observational learning (McLeod, 2023). Bandura (1977) asserted that behavioral forces reside within the individual and each behavior has an explanation. Social learning theory takes into consideration the effects of environmental and cognitive factors on learning and behavior (McLeod, 2016).

Figure 3

Social Learning Theory

Note. Adapted from *What is Bandura's Social Learning Theory? 3 Examples,* 2021, by J. Sutton (https://positivepsychology.com/social-learning-theory-bandura/). Copyright 2021 by the author.

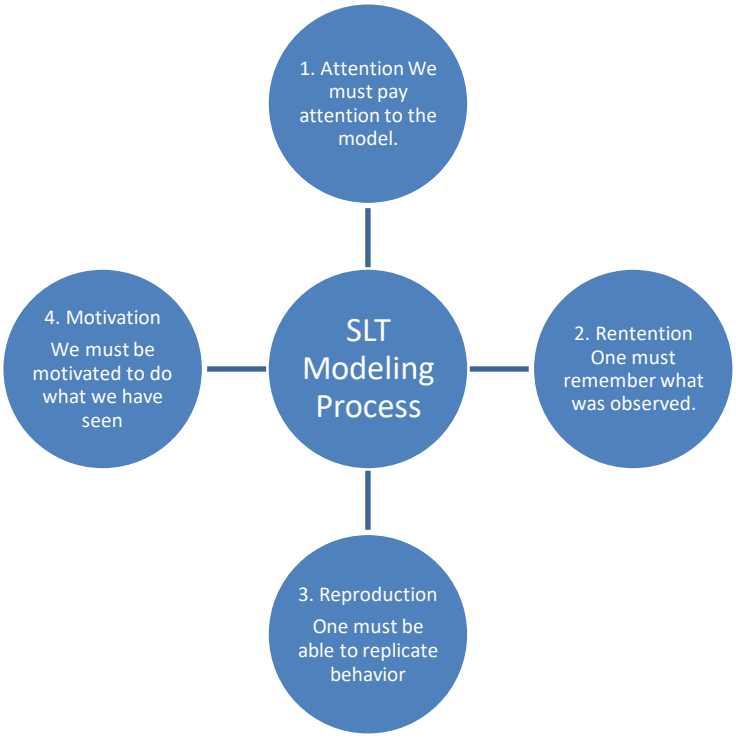
When theorizing about social learning, Bandura concurred with previous behaviorist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning but added two important concepts in which "mediating processes occur between stimuli and responses, and behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning" (McLeod, 2016, p. 1). Observational learning occurs every day. Children observe people in their environments, such as role models, parents, television characters, family members, friends, and teachers (Bandura, 1977). These observations provide children with examples of behavior to imitate or encode for later use (McLeod, 2016). The behaviors are acknowledged by adults with positive or negative reinforcement, which tells the child whether or not the behavior is acceptable (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012). Reinforcement is believed to be a crucial factor in changing a person's behavior (McLeod, 2016). Bandura (1977) believed children will behave in a way to earn approval because children seek approval.

Many theorists believe social learning theory connects traditional learning theory, such as behaviorism ,and a cognitive approach because it emphasizes the use of cognitive

factors needed to learn (McLeod, 2016). “Bandura believes humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behavior and its consequence” (McLeod, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, children do not immediately imitate a behavior. Prior to imitation, there is a thought process that Bandura (1977) referred to as the mediational process. This process refers to the period of time when the child observes the behavior and either imitates it or not. During the mediational process, four criteria must be met: attention (to behavior and consequence), retention (how well the child remembers the behavior), reproduction (replicating the behavior), and motivation (will to perform behavior, influenced by reinforcement or punishment; Sutton, 2021). Figure 4 shows the modeling process. Social learning theory helps to explain behavior; however, it is limited in explaining behavior in regard to thoughts and feelings (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012).

Figure 4

Modeling Process



Note. Adapted from *What is Bandura's Social Learning Theory? 3 Examples,* 2021, by J. Sutton (https://positivepsychology.com/social-learning-theory-bandura/). Copyright 2021 by the author.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning model is based on Albert Bandura's theory of self efficacy. In 1977, Bandura developed and published his theory on self-efficacy and emphasized the influence self-efficacy has on motivation and learning (Artino, 2012). Bandura believed a person's self-efficacy can help shape the foundation for "motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment" (Lopez-Garrido, 2023, p. 1). Self-efficacy plays a prominent role in individuals believing they can or cannot achieve or succeed in a specific situation.

"Beliefs of personal efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency. If people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things

happen" (Bandura, 1977, p. 3). Self-efficacy is believed by many theorists to be a crucial theoretical contribution to studies regarding academic achievement, motivation, and learning (Artino, 2012). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is the base of human functioning. In addition to individuals possessing the skills and knowledge to perform a task, they must also believe they can successfully execute the behavior under any circumstance; this is where skills and efficacy meet. These two components contribute to what Bandura referred to as *reciprocal causation*, meaning one component depends on the functioning of the other (Artino, 2012). Causation refers to the "functional dependence between events" (Bandura, 1977, p. 5). Bandura (1977) explained:

> in social cognitive theory, human agency operates within an interdependent causal structure involving triadic reciprocal causation. In this transactional view of self and society, internal personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events; behavior; and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bidirectionally. (pp. 5-6)

In the triadic reciprocal causation, there are three determinants; B stands for behavior, P stands for internal personal factors (cognitive, affective, biological), and E stands for the external environment (Bandura, 1977).

Through his research, Bandura predicted that self-efficacy could influence an individual's effort, choice of activities, and persistence (Artino, 2012). Individuals with high self-efficacy experience higher levels of resilience, higher academic achievement, improved lifestyle habits, and better employee performance (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). Those with lower levels of self-efficacy with respect to a specific task may avoid the task, or not participate in the activity (Artino, 2012). Self-efficacy theory suggests that

individuals gain information to examine efficacy beliefs from four primary sources: enactive mastery experiences (performance), observation of others (vicarious experience), persuasion, and physiological feedback (See Figure 5).

Figure 5

Four Sources of Efficacy

Note. Adapted from *Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory of Motivation in Psychology*, 2023, by G. Lopez-Garrido, Simply Psychology (https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html). Copyright 2023 by the author.

These four sources provide the individual with efficacy to determine behavior and performance for the specific task or situation. Research supports mastery experience as one of the most influential sources of efficacy because it provides the individual with direct evidence to help them gather specific resources needed in order to succeed (Artino, 2012).

Since Bandura first introduced his theory of self-efficacy, numerous studies from different disciplines and settings have found self-efficacy to be linked to "phobias, addiction, depression, social skills, assertiveness, stress in a variety of contexts, smoking behavior, pain control, health, and athletic performance" (Usher & Parajes, 2008, p. 1).

However, Usher and Parajes (2008) pointed out a concern with determining an appropriate measure of efficacy, especially when predicting academic outcomes. A common self-efficacy measurement utilizes an omnibus type of instrument that measures an individual's sense of efficacy without giving them a specific related task. Usher and Parajes suggested that efficacy is more of a personality trait rather than a personal judgment, and academic self-perceptions of competence are not considered a reliable measure in asking an individual to rate themselves without a clear activity or task. Usher and Parajes claimed that individuals will think of a similar task and attempt to evaluate their efficacy whether or not the task is aligned with the question/task being asked.

Biglan (1987) emphasized how the role of environment was neglected in self-efficacy theory. He argued that behavior and environment should be analyzed to better understand how the environment affects behavior. This is considered a more behavior-analytic alternative that focuses on relationships and environmental events. When this relationship is better understood, according to Biglan, effective treatment methods can be developed.

Additional studies have utilized this framework and found some limitations. Tsay (2003) utilized self-efficacy theory to achieve compliance; however, additional factors besides efficacy may have contributed to the change in behavior. Sarkar et al. (2006) utilized this theory for self-management care for patients with diabetes, but concluded that the patients' environment needed to be considered. Sarkar believed environmental factors should have been considered in self-efficacy theory due to the impact it can have on behavior which in turn can affect self-efficacy.

Although there are criticisms of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, it is still one of the most common frameworks that researchers utilize when examining self-efficacy in education (Artino, 2012). Previous studies have found that self-efficacy beliefs and tasks work together, and multiple self-efficacy beliefs contribute to positive and negative psychosocial outcomes (Cattelino et al., 2021). Usher and Pajares (2008) believed self-efficacy to be a better indicator of an individual's capability as opposed to using objective assessment results.

Impact on Learning During Times of Crisis

Times of crisis can have a huge impact on the classroom. The magnitude of the crisis determines how the crisis may impact students. According to Huston and DiPietro (2007),

> a local event may lead to a more obvious impact on your students, the effects can be just as difficult based on the sheer *magnitude* and scale (national events with wide media coverage) and the degree to which students are likely to *identify* with the victim(s) of the tragedy and feel like vicarious victims (fellow students, fellow women, fellow members of a group targeted by a hate crime, fellow Americans). (p. 219)

The overall response from students and teachers during times of crisis can affect learning, which has been confirmed in psychological, cognitive, and neuroscience research. Individual crises (loss of a family member, break-up with significant other) can affect one student's learning and performance (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, 2001). In contrast, "communal crises" (death of a student or teacher, natural disasters, the 9/11

attacks, school shootings, or community attacks) can affect multiple students' learning and performance (p. 1).

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic affected students all around the world. A 2020 study conducted in Spain focused on the learning gap and family/school divisions during the COVID-19 crisis (Bonal & González, 2020). The National Association of Education Progress published a report that indicated student math and literacy scores dropped the lowest in 2022 in comparison to previous school years (Moulton, 2023).

In a study by Bonal and González (2020), over 35,000 responses were collected from families with children from 3-18 years old. Their research concluded that learning opportunities during the COVID-19 crisis varied significantly for each child Additionally, results varied by school type (private versus public), economic status, race, and living conditions. These inequalities among students affected learning opportunities and left schools and educators unprepared for a time of crisis. In the final analysis, Bonal and González highlighted the important role of the school to ensure learning opportunities for all students, specifically students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and for schools to create an educational emergency plan with social and educational objectives for times of crisis.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the directive for schools was to shift to remote learning. However, this directive left school districts unprepared to navigate the crisis in all respects (instruction delivery, technology use, communication and interaction; Chiemeke & Imafidor, 2020). During times of crisis, motivation can be deeply affected, which can affect academic performance. Teachers and students feared they would contract COVID-19, which contributed to the decrease in academic motivation. However,

researchers saw an increase among teacher and student perceptions of computer self-efficacy. Higher perceptions of computer self-efficacy were found to positively affect academic motivation (Çevik & Bakioğlu, 2022). Teachers and students who felt confident navigating remote learning had a higher level of academic motivation. Studies show that an increase of positivity is linked to higher levels of academic motivation during times of crisis (Lin & Lehman, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Efficacy in Education

Over the past 30 years, educational researchers from different fields have utilized Bandura's self-efficacy theory in order to predict and explain human functioning (Artino, 2012). A recent study conducted in Italy examined the relationship between emotional and self-regulated self-efficacy, and positive coping strategies among 485 students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers concluded that educators should support self-efficacy behavior among their students in order to promote positive feelings and coping strategies that come from everyday challenges and times of crisis (Cattelino et al., 2021). Self-efficacy is deemed to be a significant resource to promote overall wellbeing and optimal functioning (Yap & Baharudin, 2016).

Davis (2020) conducted a study that examined female students' self-efficacy while participating in school-based robotics program to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between gender beliefs and self-efficacy. Davis found a correlation between self-efficacy and gender beliefs related to female students participating in the robotics program. Female students reported feeling an increase in confidence, which presented through social situations, increased leadership within the program, and improved skills in academic STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math)

subjects. Specifically, these findings support Bandura's research, "establishing significant positive relationships between self-efficacy and goal setting, ability, memory performance, cognitive effort, and motivation" (p. 102). Further observations noted an increase in communication and confidence in sharing ideas and feelings with others.

Cunningham (2021) conducted a study that examined the relationships among student self-efficacy, teacher actions, and academic growth. Cunningham concluded that teachers should give students feedback based on their ability as opposed to effort. Researchers saw a decrease in student self-efficacy levels when teachers used effort-based feedback but saw an increase in self-efficacy levels when teachers used ability-based feedback. Additionally, Cunningham found that self-efficacy is related to academic achievement, not academic growth.

Similar to students, teachers who have high self-efficacy are linked to better overall job performance (Shemshack, 2022). This particular study conducted by Shemshack (2022) focused on 385 teachers' feedback regarding what factors contribute to an increase in self efficacy. Shemshack found a correlation between teachers with high self-efficacy and staying in the field of teaching for a longer duration in comparison to teachers with low self-efficacy. As a result of teachers returning to school post COVID-19, Shemshack noted this was a common factor of decreased self-efficacy among the participants. As a result of this study Shemshack determined different ways teachers' self-efficacy can be increased through training, support, and additional resources.

Having teachers with high self-efficacy has been linked to different positive outcomes for both students and teachers. Self-efficacy grows in educators as their experiences accumulate (Calkins, 2022). Therefore, lower levels of self-efficacy may be

prevalent in newer teachers in comparison to teachers who have been teaching for many years. According to Bullock et al. (2015), newly hired teachers struggle with self-efficacy due to the lack of exposure to challenging experiences or situations that contribute to an individual's self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy in Special Education

Education is a highly diverse field, and self-efficacy can affect students and teachers from all grade levels and programs. Aljohani (2019) examined the role of self-efficacy among eight male special education teachers teaching students with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Six major themes emerged from the data: difficulties in the beginning of teachers' careers, students with intellectual disabilities posed instructional challenges for these teachers, minimal administrative support, lack of teaching practices, effects of confidence on teacher performance, and influence of family beliefs and involvement with self-efficacy. The researcher concluded that these specific challenges, issues, and stories reported by the participants greatly affected their overall self-efficacy. However, with more time and teaching experience, these special education teachers noted an increase in self-efficacy.

Francis-Denton (2023) conducted a study that analyzed general education teachers' self-efficacy teaching in a middle school inclusive classroom. The study found that general education teachers who were educated in a traditional pathway had high self-efficacy, whereas general education teachers who were educated in an alternative pathway had low self-efficacy regarding teaching students with disabilities. It was noted that general education teachers who had a relationship with a special education teacher reported higher levels of self-efficacy; Francis-Denton claimed that self-efficacy among

teachers could be improved if there was a school-wide culture of inclusion. The influence on self-efficacy in this study related to teacher perceptions of managing student behavior, collaboration with other teachers and families, administrative support, and time for planning and preparing. Francis-Denton found that teachers rated themselves higher in self-efficacy when students had positive behavior and academic performance.

Additionally, Koch (2019) conducted a study examining the relationship between general education teacher self-efficacy and academic achievement among students with disabilities. Koch found that general education teachers had lower levels of self-efficacy in areas related to the instruction of students with disabilities. Koch decided to investigate this data further and used qualitative interviews that presented a common theme of not feeling prepared by their teaching preparation programs in the area of special education and teaching students with disabilities. Teachers noted that if these programs focused more on special education instruction, they would contribute to higher levels of self-efficacy among teachers.

Trice (2022) conducted a study examining the relationship between mindset and self-efficacy among special education teachers in Texas. After analyzing the data, Trice found no significant correlation "between mindset and overall self-efficacy, self-efficacy in student engagement, self-efficacy in instructional strategies, and self-efficacy in classroom management among special education teachers in Texas region 2" (p. 55). However, Trice concluded from the statistical analysis that interventions, mindset changes, and teacher self-efficacy contribute to improved student learning.

Special Education Students Returning to School

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2021) recognizes that all students need extra support, emphasizing overall health and wellbeing among students and educators in the hope of addressing behavioral and mental health needs. School districts across the nation have felt the impact on special education students returning to school post-COVID-19 (Agoratus, 2021). The AAP stated,

> the impact of loss of instructional time and related services, including mental health services, as well as occupational, physical, and speech/language therapy during the period of school closures and remote learning is significant for students with disabilities. All students, but especially those with disabilities may have more difficulty with the social and emotional aspects of transitioning out of and back into the school setting. (p. 2)

Additionally, the AAP recommends that educators attend trainings on how to support children post-pandemic.

Since returning to school, students with disabilities and educators have had to make significant adjustments. Ray (2020) emphasized that the most important areas of focus for special education students returning to school are reacquiring related services, IEP minutes being met, and students continuing to work toward their goals as defined in their IEP.

Summary

School districts and educators must come together to meet the needs of special education students returning to school post-COVID-19. The disruption in the educational system had a profound impact on all students, but especially students with disabilities.

Instructional minutes, IEP service minutes, related services, and classroom accommodations were ignored during the transition to remote learning. The combination of academic and behavior regression has significantly affected students with disabilities (Stein & Strauss, 2020). This literature review examined a considerable amount of research on the impacts of school closures and remote learning on students' academic performance, behavior, and mental health. However, there is minimal research on special education students returning to school post-pandemic.

The four theoretical foundations explored through this research laid out different theories and approaches to handling times of crisis. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory guided the framework for this study to determine the levels of self-efficacy among students in special education returning to school in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and connections. The perceptions of special education educators regarding the effects of special education students returning to school after the pandemic formed the basis of the study. These perceptions are imperative for future crises and how educators respond with instruction and mental health supports. This study can build understanding of the effects on academic performance and mental health on special education students returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it will give special education educators insight into specific academic and mental health areas in which students need to be supported. Doing so will allow educators to tailor their instructional delivery, classroom supports, and social emotional curriculum to meet their students' needs.

Synthesis Matrix

Researchers often use a synthesis matrix to organize study variables presented in the research to organize references and identify how the sources relate to each other. It also enables the researcher to categorize different themes and arguments presented on specific topics (Ingram et al., 2006). Please refer to this study's synthesis matrix in Appendix H.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methodology used to complete this research. It begins by restating the purpose statement and research questions, followed by the methods used to collect the data. It provides information on the study population and sampling methods used to conduct this research, as well as the research instrument used. The chapter concludes with an explanation of procedures and methods used to collect and analyze the data and limitations to the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Research Questions

1. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?
3. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative approach. Qualitative research encompasses numerous different frameworks. A researcher must assess the needs of the study to determine which qualitative framework can best guide the fieldwork and interpretation (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research gathers and analyzes non-numerical data in order to gain a deeper understanding of an individual's perception, experience, or beliefs. Qualitative designs include ethnographic, phenomenological, case study, grounded theory, and critical studies (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). These types of research designs aim to explore and explain an experience from a targeted individual or group. A phenomenological study is rooted in philosophy and explores the meaning and reality of a lived experience of a phenomenon among a person or group of people (Patton, 2015). This study focused on the lived experiences of special education teachers and their perceptions of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on special education students returning to school.

This research design was chosen because it focuses on understanding how individuals process an experience or situation. Specifically, a phenomenological study examines an experience among an individual or group of people to better understand how they perceive it, explain it, recall it, feel about it, process it, and talk with others about it (Patton, 2015). This design provided the researcher the necessary information to answer and report on the research questions.

Population

In research, the population is the group of individuals that conforms to specific criteria to which the results can be generalized (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The

general population of this study are special education teachers in the United States. Special education educators work with students who have a wide range of learning, emotional, mental, and physical disabilities. The majority of special education educators work in public schools teaching students ranging from preschool to high school for the traditional 10-month school year; however, some work year round (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Special education credentials allow these educators to teach students with mild to moderate disabilities; moderate to severe disabilities; deaf and hard of hearing students, students with visual impairments, physical, and health impairments; and early childhood special education students (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2023).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), there are 38,000 special education educators in the United States. Of those 38,000 special education educators, 8,730 special education educators are in California. California is home to 1,021 school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

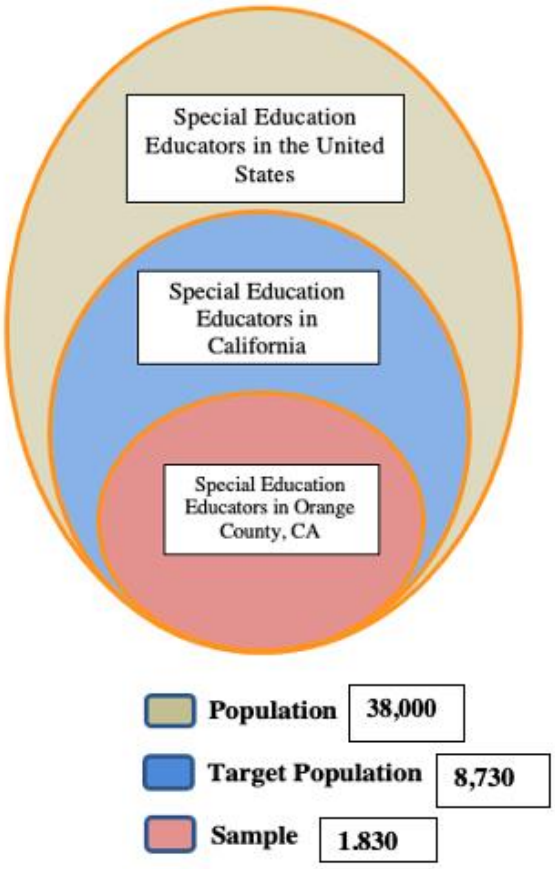
Sampling Frame/Target Population

The target population represents the nature of the population of interest and usually differs from the overall population. The target population is a more refined group of individuals with specific attributes of interest to the researcher (Creswell, 2012). In Orange County, California, which houses 33 school districts, there are approximately 1,830 special education educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The population in the study was narrowed down to special education teachers who teach students with mild to moderate disabilities in Orange County California; have taught before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic; and teach grades K-6. Students with mild to moderate

disabilities require assistance to address learning problems related to intellectual, behavioral, emotional, communication, sensory, or motor impairments (Fresno Pacific University School of Education, 2023). See Figure 6 for the population and sample of the study.

Figure 6

Population and Sample



Sample

In research, sampling is selecting a subset of the population of interest from which data was collected. When choosing a sampling method, it is crucial to choose a method that supports the purpose of the study. There are two main types of sampling techniques

used in research: probability and nonprobability sampling. Probability sampling is typically used in quantitative studies because this technique draws from a large population, is generalizable, and is random. However, qualitative studies utilize smaller populations purposely chosen to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions or experiences with a phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). This study examined the perceptions of K-6 special education educators on special education students returning to school post-pandemic in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections. For this study, it was crucial to identify elements of a special education educator. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, special education educators were described as having the following characteristics:

- Teaching before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Teaching students in grades K-6.
- Teaching students with mild to moderate disabilities.
- Teaching in Orange County, California.

The study utilized purposeful and convenience sampling to select participants. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative studies in order for the researcher to choose individuals who have experienced the phenomenon that is being investigated (Palinkas et al., 2015). This specific technique allows the researcher to target participants based on the purpose of the study and the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences from the phenomenon. The sampling method was determined appropriate because the study focused on special education educators who taught K-6 students in Orange County, CA. In addition, these participants had experience with

teaching before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Special education educators who met the criteria were put on a list.

Another sampling method utilized was convenience sampling. This specific type of sampling method refers to individuals who are selected based on availability and accessibility (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The researcher interviewed special education teachers who were accessible and available for interviews via Zoom video conferencing. From the list gathered, participants were then invited to participate in the study via email. An email was sent out to K-6 special education educators in Orange County, CA. Prospective participants were emailed a Survey Monkey link that inquired about participating in the study. The survey asked for the name of the teacher, which district they were in, which program they taught mild/moderate (MM) or moderate/severe (MS); if they taught before, during, and after COVID-19; and if they were willing to participate in an interview through Zoom video conferencing.

The data collected through this sample gave the researcher an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The sample of the population encompassed K-6 special education teachers within Orange County, C.A. Specifically, 10 mild to moderate special education teachers from schools located in Orange County, CA. In phenomenological studies significance is placed on the quality and depth of the data collected (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), smaller samples allow for greater depth of exploration. Therefore, in phenomenological studies, it is recommended that the sample size be between six and 20 individuals. Utilizing a sample size of 10 mild to moderate special education teachers was determined to be an appropriate sample size for

this study because this amount allowed the researcher to obtain credible information and not lose sight of the topic (Ellis, 2016).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data gathering instrument (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research utilizes five different sources of data collection: observations, interviews (semi-structured and unstructured), questionnaires, document review, and audio-visual materials. The two most common forms of data collection in qualitative research are interviews and observations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). In phenomenological research, interviews are a key component of data collection (Patton, 2015). A semi-structured interview gives the participant a chance to answer open-ended questions that align with the research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Therefore, the study used semi-structured open ended interview questions that aligned with Bandura's self-efficacy theory in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections.

Interview Design and Development

Interviews are the most common form of qualitative data gathering (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Patton (2015) identified four forms of qualitative instrumentation:

- Informal conversational interview
- Interview guide approach
- Standardized open-ended interview
- Closed and/or fixed response interview

The type of interview determines the type of questions that will be asked. Conversational interviews have little to no structure and questions flow from a conversation between the

researcher and the participant. However, data gathered from conversational interviews can be difficult to analyze. Closed or fixed response interviews do not allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding and use preformatted questions that offer a list of responses. Lastly, the interview guide approach uses preformatted questions with probes but allows the participant to answer naturally (Sewell, 2023).

Semi-structured Interview

In phenomenological research, the most common type of interview is a semi structured interview that uses semi structured questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Semi structured questions "have no choices from which the respondent selects an answer" (p. 206). In a semi structured interview, a guide and questions are developed based on the purpose of the study. Participants tend to answer questions conversationally and the interview is generally recorded (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

Primary Instrument

The study utilized a standardized open-ended interview with semi structured questions as the primary source of data collection. The interview was designed with members from the thematic team. A total of nine thematic dissertation research candidates and core faculty members were broken down into three different subgroups. From these three subgroups, one student from each subgroup was asked to volunteer to be on the interview development team with one core faculty member. All interview questions were aligned to the theory of self-efficacy in regard to the four variables: academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections. The interview development team brainstormed interview questions and prompts related to the research and variables. The thematic team came together as a whole to review the questions and

offer suggestions. Each subgroup refined the interview questions to best fit their target population and ensure alignment to self-efficacy theory. The final interview (Appendix A) contained six questions with prompts provided to gain a deeper understanding of the question being asked. Each question was in alignment with the purpose of the study to understand educator perceptions of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students returning to school in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections.

Field Test

It is crucial that the instrumentation used for collecting data is tested to help with reducing error during the collection process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Utilizing a field test allows for refinement, helps to increase the reliability of the study, and provides an opportunity to check for validity (Patton, 2015). For the purpose of this study, a field test was administered using the interview questions followed by field test questions (Appendix B) and observer reflection feedback (Appendix C). Each member of the thematic team reached out to a field test participant who fit the target population sample, and a peer conducted a field test and gathered feedback from an individual with doctoral experience and degree. Each subgroup met once again with their core faculty member to discuss these findings from the participant and observer. The final instrument was a result of the field test and collaborative refinement among the thematic team. The final version of the interview questions was approved by all thematic and faculty members.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol (Appendix D) was developed in alignment with the study. An interview protocol provides the participant with information regarding the study, the

purpose, definitions that may be helpful during the interview, and confidentiality protections (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The protocol included an introduction from the researcher, purpose of the study, applicable definitions, and interview script. Additionally, participants received University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix E) and an informed consent and audio release (Appendix F). Prior to the interview the participant signed the consent form and audio release form and gave them to the researcher. These documents were unified and used by all members of the thematic team.

Validity

The concept of validity refers to the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (McLeod, 2023). In qualitative research, validity refers to the mutual interpretations of meanings among participants and the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). To establish validity in this qualitative study, the researcher utilized several strategies that help researchers determine validity in qualitative research: content validity, participant language and verbatim accounts, multiple researchers, mechanically recorded data, and participant review.

Content Validity

This specific type of validity addresses whether or not a measure captures the most relevant and important aspects of the concept being researched. Content validity relies heavily on input from experts in the field (Keeley et al. 2013). The three faculty members leading the thematic research group served as experts from the field. They helped increase the study's validity by guiding the development of the interview questions. In addition, a field test was used as a means to establish validity.

Participant Language and Verbatim Accounts

This strategy focuses on the language and terms used in interview questions to ensure the participant can understand what is being asked (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). During the development of the interview questions, the faculty member helped guide terminology that should be used and/or avoided. In addition, the interview development team was advised to come up with a short list of definitions to provide more clarification to participants if needed.

Multiple Researchers

Utilizing more than one researcher helps to increase the validity of a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The researcher collaborated with six other researchers and three faculty members during the development of the interview questions. The interview development team had many meetings to ensure alignment throughout the interview questions, purpose of the study, and research questions. The six researchers created definitions for the variables, interview questions, revised the interview questions, field tested, then conducted interviews.

Mechanically Recorded Data and Participant Review

The researcher audio recorded all interviews with a digital recording device and a backup recording device application called Voice Recorder. After the interviews, the recording was transcribed and the transcript was sent to the participant for review. It is important for participants to review and edit any information from the interview data for accuracy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

Reliability

Reliability is a concept that is used in both qualitative and quantitative research (Leung, 2015). In qualitative research, reliability can be challenging; however, reliability lies within consistency and refers to "the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets" (Creswell & Poth, 2013, p. 1). Researchers in qualitative studies can use different methods to ensure reliability throughout the study by incorporating refutational analysis, triangulation, use of comprehensive data and tables to record data, and intercoder reliability. Utilizing these methods can help support the data source, validation, and presentation of the research as well as support the claim of reliability in regard to form and context (Thakur & Chetty, 2020).

Refutational Analysis

This method helps to support a study's claim of reliability. This process involves exploring and explaining different theories and ideas between individual studies (Thakur & Chetty, 2020). The researcher explored and explained various theories and studies in Chapter II that related to COVID-19, school shutdowns, remote learning, special education, and self-efficacy.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a process where more than one source is used for data collection and analysis to establish reliability (Thakur & Chetty, 2020). Triangulation is accomplished by "ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (p. 2). The primary source of data collection was interviews. Additionally, observations were collected and artifacts provided to the researcher were reviewed to help detect themes or patterns across multiple data sources.

Use of Comprehensive Data and Tables

This strategy helps to organize the data and establish its authenticity. This process includes using tools or software programs such as Microsoft Excel, Google Sheets, or NVIVO for data analysis (Thakur & Chetty, 2020). The researcher utilized tables throughout Chapter IV to present and describe the findings, as well as Microsoft Excel and NVIVO for coding themes from interview data.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability is an agreement of measure between different coders in regard to how the data is coded. This process is crucial in qualitative research because it helps to minimize researcher bias and provides an accurate interpretation of the themes and patterns found in the data. Peer researchers reviewed 10% of the data from this study with a level of .80 agreement. In qualitative studies the level of agreement should be .80 or greater and set prior to coding (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Accuracy of at least 85% across peer researchers indicated the coding was reliable.

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection for this phenomenological study was semi-structured recorded interviews. Additionally, observations and any provided artifacts were collected to help with triangulation of the data. McMillan and Schumacher (2015) asserted that semi-structured interviews are one of the most common sources of data for qualitative research, especially phenomenological studies. Interviews were recorded; therefore, the researcher did not depend on reflexive notes. The purpose of this study was to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with

regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections. The overall reason for conducting phenomenological studies is to describe and interpret the lived experiences of participants; therefore, the data collection method aligned with the purpose of the study.

Interview Process

The primary method of data collection in this study was a semi-structured, open-ended interview of 10 K-6 mild to moderate special education teachers in Orange County, California. Prior to the data collection, the researcher completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) protection of human research participants certification (Appendix G). The data collection began after the researcher received approval from University of Massachusetts Global Institutional Review Board (UMGIRB). Before each interview, the participant received the following documents: of an informed consent and audio recording release (Appendix F), UMGIRB research participant bill of rights (Appendix E), and a copy of the interview questions (Appendix A). Once given the documents, participants were asked to review for clarity, then sign the consent form. After the researcher received written consent, the researcher followed the interview protocol guide that included a script explaining the purpose of the study. Throughout the interview the researcher followed the interview protocol, which guided the seven interview and probing questions. Prompt questions were also included to encourage a comprehensive response. Interviews were about 30 minutes long and conducted via zoom.

Digital recordings were completed for each interview and personally coded to ensure confidentiality. These recordings were stored in the researcher's locked office cabinet. During the interviews, notes were taken to document the environment and any

non-verbal cues from the participant. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher had the recordings transcribed and combined with the notes to be analyzed for themes or patterns. The researcher utilized a coding software program called NVivo to organize and categorize the data. The transcripts from the interviews were uploaded into NVivo, which allowed the researcher to code straight from the transcript connecting different themes from each interview. Lastly, the data and notes were destroyed 1 month after the study was published.

Artifacts

Artifacts are documents and relics that describe a person's experience, beliefs, knowledge, and actions. Some artifact types include personal documents, official documents, and objects (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The researcher collected artifacts from participants. These artifacts included missing assignment lists, email correspondences, behavior contracts, and systems/programs that have been put in place since returning to school post-pandemic. The data analyzed from the artifacts was reviewed and coded for themes and patterns to add to the triangulation of data sources.

Observations

An additional data collection method used in this study was observations. Specifically in qualitative research, observations can be insightful because they provide knowledge about the participant's natural environment (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Observational data is collected to "describe in depth and detail the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspectives of those observed" (Patton, 2015, p. 331). Descriptions need to be factual, accurate, and thorough

(Patton, 2015). Observing the participants in their natural setting allows the researcher to enhance their understanding of the phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). During the observations, the researcher was looking for the following three criterions:

1. Are teachers interacting with students? Asking them questions?
2. Are teachers engaging in active listening techniques with their students?
3. Are teachers open to change in order to respond to the needs of their students?

Participants were observed in the classroom, and the observational data was analyzed and coded for themes or patterns. This data was destroyed 1 month after being published. Lastly, the researcher triangulated the observational data with interviews, and artifact data.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis interprets and summarizes the data collected in order to determine themes and patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). This study utilized inductive analysis. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2015), inductive analysis is one of the most frequently used methods for analyzing qualitative research. Inductive analysis begins with the researcher collecting the data, coding the data, identifying themes and/or patterns, and presenting findings.

Collecting and Documenting Data

In qualitative research, data analysis occurs at different times throughout the data collection process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). During the interviews, the researcher may start to see patterns or themes and can adjust interview questions based on emerging information (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015; Patton, 2015). For this study, the

instrument was not modified. All participants answered the same interview and probing questions to decrease any bias and increase the validity of the study. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were able to see the transcripts and review them for accuracy.

Coding the Data

After the data was fully transcribed and reviewed by participants, the researcher coded and categorized the data. The researcher reviewed the data to identify possible segments. Data segments are units of information consisting of one to three sentences. The researcher reviewed these data segments and assigned them codes. Codes are words that give meaning to the specified data set (McMillan & Schumacher, 22015010). The researcher used the data coding software NVivo to organize and categorize the data, then obtain the frequency of identified themes and patterns found in the data.

Themes and Patterns

In inductive analysis, the first step is to identify themes. Once the data and codes were grouped together, major and minor themes emerged. The researcher used the framework of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to navigate the identification of themes throughout the data. After themes are established, patterns can be identified within the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2015), "the ultimate goal of qualitative research is to make general statements about relationships among categories by discovering patterns in the data" (p. 378).

Presentation of Findings

In phenomenological studies, descriptions are used to elaborate on the lived experience of the phenomenon and how it occurred (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

This study utilized direct quotes from participant interviews to accurately depict the lived experience of K-6 special education teachers retarding students returning to school post-pandemic.

Limitations

Most studies have limitations of some sort, and it is imperative that the researcher disclose them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Such limitations can affect validity, reliability, or generalizability of the study, and can arise from various sources, including design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of the study (Patton, 2015). The limitations of this study included the researcher as the instrument, generalizability, and sample size. The researcher acknowledged and addressed each limitation within the study.

Researcher as an Instrument

A common limitation for qualitative research is the use of the researcher as an instrument (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). This can have an effect on bias when the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes the data. Utilizing data collection procedures and intercoder reliability helped to limit biases and enhance credibility (Patton, 2015). In this study, the researcher conducted field tests and gathered input from peer researchers and faculty members to further limit the potential for any biases. Throughout all interviews, the researcher used an interview guide to help navigate the interviews and ensure questions remained the same for each participant.

Generalizability

Phenomenological studies make it difficult to generalize the findings. In phenomenological studies, the findings are not meant to be generalized to a larger

population; rather, the study seeks out the lived experiences from individuals (smaller populations) who have experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, sample sizes differ based on the purpose of the study, data collection method, and participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

Sample Size

In qualitative research, the sample sizes vary based on the type of study, purpose of the study, and available participants. Overall sample sizes in qualitative research are normally smaller than sample sizes in quantitative research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Utilizing a smaller sample sizes allows the researcher to dive deep into the data. This study was limited to 10 K-6 special education teachers who teach mild to moderate (MM) special education classes in Orange County, California. Even though there were only 10 participants, each participant is from a different part of Orange County and teaches at different districts increasing the diversity among participants.

Summary

Following a review of purpose of the study and research questions, this chapter highlighted the methodology of the study and provided explanations as to why specific methods were chosen. The instrumentation used for the study aligned with the purpose of the study in determining K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections. The chapter discussed the population, sample, instrumentation, data collection, analysis, and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

The nationwide school shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have to had academic and behavioral effects on the education system (Bonal & Gonzalez, 2020; Crow, 2022; De La Cruz, 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Moulton, 2023; U.S Department of Education, 2021). However, as noted in the literature review, there continues to be minimal research on special education students returning to school post-pandemic. Therefore, this study focused on K-6 special education teachers' perceptions of students returning to school post-pandemic to help capture and describe their lived experiences in regard to students returning to school and the impact that may have had on student self-efficacy. Chapter IV begins with the purpose statement and research questions, followed by an overview of the research methodology and data collection, population, sample, demographic data, and presentation and analysis of the data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Research Questions

1. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?

3. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to determine K-6 special education teachers' perceptions of the impact on students returning to school post-pandemic. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and artifacts that were collected from participants. The primary source of data collection was interviews. Observations and artifacts were used to triangulate the data in order to support and identify patterns and themes across multiple sources of data.

Interviews

The researcher conducted semi-structured open ended interviews with 10 special education teachers who teach students with mild to moderate disabilities in Orange County, CA. The interview consisted of six questions and related probing questions that was developed by the team of six peer researchers and three faculty members. The interview questions were based on Bandura's theory of self-efficacy in relation to students' self-efficacy skills regarding academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections post-pandemic. Interviews opened with a question about a change in self-efficacy skills. Each domain had a question with at least one probing question. The interview concluded with a question asking if the participant would like to share any additional information. All 10 of the interviews were conducted through Zoom video

conferencing. The interviews lasted between 25-37 minutes with an average length of 28 minutes per interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher reviewed transcriptions with the participants to ensure accuracy and offer an opportunity to change any responses.

Observations

Three observations were conducted through the permission of study participants (Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 7). The observations lasted a total of 2 hours and took place in the participants' natural setting (schools located in Orange County, CA). The researcher recorded field notes and checked off criteria that were observed throughout the observations. The three criteria for observations included:

1. Are teachers interacting with students? Asking them questions?
2. Are teachers engaging in active listening techniques with their students?
3. Are teachers open to change in order to respond to the needs of their students?

Artifacts

The researcher collected artifacts the day of the interview, and/or after the interviews. A total of nine artifacts were obtained from four participants (P1, P8, P7, P9). The artifacts consisted of:

- Classroom presentation on growth mindset
- Missing class assignments list
- Emails (admin to teachers; parents to admin)
- Restorative circles sample
- Behavior contract (completed)
- Lesson on positive affirmations

- ELA versus math scores

Population

The overall population of this study was 38,000 special education teachers in the United States. The population was narrowed down to a target population of 8,730 special education teachers in California and from there narrowed down to 1,830 special education teachers who teach in Orange County, CA.

Sample

The study utilized purposeful and convenience sampling to select participants for the study. The study was delimited to teachers who taught before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic, taught students with mild to moderate disabilities in grades K-6, and who teach in school districts located in Orange County, CA. The study was narrowed to Orange County, CA due to the accessibility and convenience to the researcher. The researcher had access to teacher directories from two school districts in Orange County, CA from which the researcher inquired participants from. The researcher sent emails to potential participants and through SurveyMonkey gathered feedback and demographic information to see who was interested and/or met the criteria. 10 respondents who met the criteria were selected for interviews and received formal invitations to participate in the study. A sample size of 10 participants was considered appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Demographic Data

The demographic data for this study was reported anonymously without any reference of any participant or organization to protect confidentiality. Participants were given a letter “P” with an associated number as presented in Table 3, which represents

their demographic data. Of the teachers who participated in the study, 20% were male and 80% were female. In addition, 50% of teachers were white, 30% of teachers were Asian, and 20% of teachers were Hispanic. Of the participants 100% held a mild to moderate credential and 20% held both mild to moderate credential and educational specialist credential. The years taught among participants ranged from 5-29 years of experience. The grade levels taught ranged from 60% of participants teaching grades 3-6, and 40% of participants teaching grades K-3.

Table 3

Demographic Data

Participant #	Gender	Ethnicity	Special Education Credential	Years Taught	Grade Level Taught
P1	Female	Asian	MM	10	4-6
P2	Female	White	MM/Ed. Specialist	8	4-6
P3	Female	Asian	MM	5	K-3
P4	Male	White	MM	12	K-3
P5	Male	White	MM	7	3-6
P6	Female	White	MM	22	3-6
P7	Female	Asian	MM/Ed. Specialist	6	K-2
P8	Female	White	MM	29	4-6
P9	Female	Hispanic	MM	9	4-6
P10	Female	Hispanic	MM	10	K-3

Presentation of the Findings

This section of the study presents the data and findings. The findings are grouped by research questions followed by a general finding.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, *How do special education teachers describe the impact of special education students returning to school after being online for two years*

with regard to mindset? Table 4 highlights the five codes that emerged from the data followed by their frequency and sources.

Table 4

Frequency of Codes and Sources: Research Question #1

Codes:	Frequency	Sources
1. Encouraging students with disabilities to change from a fixed mindset to growth mindset.	29	8
2. Growth mindset enhances self-efficacy.	25	7
3. Motivation	19	7
4. Insecurity/lack of self confidence	21	5
Emerging theme: growth mindset makes a difference		

During the analysis of the data, the researcher observed four major codes related to the research question: (a) encouraging students with disabilities to change from a fixed mindset to growth mindset, (b) growth mindset enhances self-efficacy, (c) motivation, and (d) insecurity/lack of self-confidence. The theme found among these codes was that growth mindset makes a difference.

Encouraging Students with Disabilities to Change From a Fixed Mindset to Growth Mindset

The topic of changing students' minds from a fixed mindset to growth mindset was referenced most frequently and by 80% of participants. Participants expressed that fixed mindsets is has affected their students' self-efficacy in a negative way. Participant 1 indicated that their classroom promotes a growth mindset. In addition, Participant 1 said "encouraging my students to have a growth mindset is really important and truly has an impact on their performance." They continued to explain, "when students have a fixed mindset it hinders their motivation and their want to try things that may be more difficult for them." Participant 2 shared that they have a lot of students with fixed mindsets and

"even since students have been back for 2 years I am seeing more of the fixed mindset among my students." Participant 5 expressed how "a lot of teachers are promoting growth mindset within their classrooms and emphasizing to students that mistakes are natural, everyone makes mistakes, and mistakes help us learn." Additionally, "when students use growth mindset they are more likely to try something or be open to it." Participant 8 said, "a lot of my students have fixed mindsets and it's been difficult to shift that mindset when motivation is lacking with a huge number of students. The fixed mindsets hinder creativity, and enhances self-doubt." Participant 8 also shared an email artifact between administrator and teachers that expressed the need for growth mindset activities and curriculum to promote around campus for the 2023-2024 school year. The email had information on some ways the school mental health team was going to support this initiative through classroom presentations followed by a document for teachers to sign up for the classroom presentations.

Table 5

Frequency of Artifacts for Encouraging Students with Disabilities to Change From a Fixed Mindset to Growth Mindset

Artifact	Frequency	Source
Email on growth mindset ideas/curriculum	12	P8

Growth Mindset Enhances Self-Efficacy

The topic of growth mindset and its affiliation with self-efficacy was referenced by 70% of participants. Most participants felt this was a mindset that helped student self-efficacy. Participant 1 expressed how "growth mindsets contribute to stronger self-efficacy skills which is why this mindset is so important for teachers to introduce to their students if they have not." Participant 5 said, "there are huge differences between

students with growth mindsets versus fixed mindsets." They continued to explain how "my students with growth mindsets are more willing to attempt a hard task whereas another one of my students with a fixed mindset is more likely to shut down and not attempt to finish." Participant 6 stated, "growth mindsets help with self-efficacy skills because it promotes a mindset to try, and doesn't let failure hinder their abilities or motivation." Participant 8 shared an artifact of a classroom presentation that was completed in the classroom by the mental health team that promotes a growth mindset. The presentation consisted of explaining to students what a growth mindset is, what it look likes, why it is important, and strategies to help embrace this type of mindset.

Table 6

Frequency of Artifacts for Growth Mindset Enhances Self-Efficacy Skills

Artifact	Frequency	Sources
Classroom presentation on growth mindset	9	P8

Motivation

This specific topic was referenced by 70% of participants. Participants felt that the lack of motivation within student performance was a mindset that affected their students' self-efficacy. Participant 2 stated they had seen a "decrease in motivation among many different students since returning to school." They added, "students don't want to come to school, they don't want to participate, they don't want to complete assignments, and they don't want to follow the school rules." Likewise, Participant 5 said, "motivation has taken a deep plunge. Some of the students I work with do not possess any motivation or show signs of anything that would motivate them." They continued to explain that "students seem to be more interested in video games, Pokémon, or the latest drama at school. Schoolwork is the last thing they want to do or listen to."

Participant 6 expressed concern over a lack of motivation with their students that is "starting to impact IEP goals. I have adjusted 4 students IEP goals this school year already due to the lack of progress and effort being put forth by students." Lastly, Participant 9 said they have "noticed lower energy levels among students and more students not motivated to work for their chosen reinforcement."

Insecurity/Lack of Self-Confidence

Out of the participants interviewed, 50% referenced an increase in insecurity and lack of self-confidence among students with disabilities that affected their self-efficacy. Participant 3 shared that "students are all of a sudden unsure of themselves therefore they don't participate or attempt to solve problems when called on." The participant went on to share that "they all seem to be lacking confidence in their abilities to solve math problems on the board, read passages when called on, or participate in class discussions." Participant 5 pointed out how "some of our students compare themselves to other peers who do understand the material and start to develop personal complexes about their abilities in comparison to their peers." Participant 1 shared that environment and "teacher vocabulary can also contribute to insecurities as I have seen some general education teachers call out some of my students for not being able to answer a question, not paying attention, acting out, and needing breaks." They added that "this factor has really contributed to an increase in insecurity levels with my students." Participant 7 expressed how many more of her students are participating in group counseling groups at school to "help with self-confidence because it's become a big problem at our school." Participant 1 shared an artifact of a lesson on positive affirmations they have been doing with their students to enhance their self-confidence skills.

Table 7

Frequency of Artifacts for Insecurity/Lack of Self Confidence

Artifact	Frequency	Source
Lesson on positive affirmations	6	P1

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, *How do special education teachers describe the impact of special education students returning to school after being online for two years with regard to behavior?* Table 8 displays the three codes that emerged from the data followed by their frequency and sources.

Table 8

Frequency of Codes and Sources for Research Question #2

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Task completion (initiating/finishing tasks)	31	7
2. Emotion regulation skills.	24	5
3. Maturity levels/exposure to social situations.	16	4
Emerging theme: task completion, regulating emotions in academic and social settings.		

While analyzing the data the researcher, found three major themes related to the research question: (a) task completion (initiating/finishing tasks), (b) emotion regulation skills, and (c) maturity levels/exposure to social situations. The emerging theme was the type of behaviors that have affected their students' self-efficacy, namely task completion and regulating their emotions when responding to different situations academically and socially.

Task Completion (Initiating/Finishing Tasks)

Seventy percent of participants indicated that the behavior that affected their students' self-efficacy the most was task completion in the areas of initiation and completion. Participant 2 emphasized the fact that "students are lacking the ability to start

the task even if they understand it or at least try it if they don't understand the concept." Participant 3 shared that they are "having trouble with getting students to start assignments they seem to need a lot of prompting to get started and redirection to finish." They continued to share, "for example the other day I had to have a classroom aide sit with a group of students because no work was getting done so the aide needed to sit there to prompt and redirect back to the assignment." Participant 4 expressed how "students just sit there and don't make any attempt to do the work." While sitting and waiting for answers, "students start to fill in answers with guesses so they can move onto the next activity." Participant 6 said, "a lot of my students are not wanting to complete classwork and more than half of my students do not turn in homework."

Emotion Regulation Skills

A lack of emotion regulation skills was referenced by 50% of participants. This finding indicates that half of participants felt this lack of emotion regulation ability affected their students' self-efficacy skills because it was "harder for them to control their emotions which impacted their behavior," said Participant 1, who noted that it is "very hard when students are lacking these regulation skills that are skills needed to function and be successful in life." Likewise, Participant 4 shared that their "students have a harder time regulating their emotions therefore they go from 0 to 10 instantly. We have a behavior aide to help when it escalates but it interferes with their work day." Participant 5 shared that "a lot of kids in fourth and fifth grade don't have emotion regulation skills that they would have learned in their early years of school due to being online for that period of time." Because of this, "some students get frustrated more easily, tantrum, and engage in aggressive behaviors." Additionally, Participant 6 shared, "there are some

students who just cry and tantrum all day in class, which has really impacted them all around." Similarly Participant 7 shared that their students "often have meltdowns over not being able to do a preferred activity or use the iPad." An artifact was collected from Participant 1 that displayed a behavior contract that is being used with some students to help them regulate and reflect on their behavior for that day. A second artifact was collected from the same participant that showed a completed behavior contract where the student identified their behavior, chose a coping strategy, and reflected. Students can earn up to 8 points for the day where they work for their chosen reinforcement.

Table 9

Frequency of Artifacts for Emotion Regulation Skills

Artifacts	Frequency	Source
Behavior contract	14	P1
Completed behavior contract	9	P1

Maturity Levels/Exposure to Social Situations

The topic of maturity levels among students and their exposure to social situations was referenced by 40% of participants that felt this affected their students' self-efficacy skills. Specifically, Participant 2 stated, "they don't know how to properly act we had sixth graders behaving like third graders because of the lack of social interactions for those two years." Since the students have been back "there has been improvements but when we first came back it was really astonishing to see." According to Participant 3,

> The lack of maturity with some of the older students is "shocking. A lot of my students like to tattle on each other and I teach fourth-sixth graders…. [S]tudents tattling on each other has become a really big issue on this campus…. [The] lack of social exposure has impacted the way students interact with each other

therefore there are a lot more conflicts happening and students not knowing appropriate ways of handling situations."

Participant 3 continued on to share "students often have difficulty sharing, taking turns, keeping hands and feet to themselves so if one of these situations occurs some of the times the other student responds with hitting or saying something really mean back." Students have also been observed to "have difficulty handling situations with peers due to the lack of social interactions they have experienced thus far," according to Participant 10. Some examples of these situations include "problem solving, working in groups, conflict resolution, sharing, and empathy towards one another."

Research Question 3

Research question 3 asked, *How do special education teachers describe the impact of special education students returning to school after being online for two years with regard to social connections?* Table 10 presents the three codes that emerged from the data accompanied by the frequency and sources.

Table 10

Frequency of Codes and Sources for Research Question #3

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Initiating and maintaining social relationships/interactions	24	7
2. Peer reinforcement/ encouragement from peers	21	5
3. Morning check ins/interacting with students	17	5
Emerging theme: positive structures, people, and overall environment.		

The researcher derived three major themes related to the research question: (a) initiating and maintain social relationships/interactions, (b) peer reinforcement/encouragement from peers, and (c) morning check ins/interacting with

students. An emerging theme observed was positive structures, people, and overall environment were social connections that affected their students' self-efficacy.

Initiating and Maintaining Social Relationships/Interactions

Out of the participants 70% expressed their concern for their students "social skills and how they interact with each other." According to Participant 2, "when students came back to school they didn't know how to talk to each other because a lot of them talked to each other through messenger, zoom, or email during their time at home." They continued on to express how the "lack of social interactions with students impacted their ability and willingness to want to interact with each other in-person." Participant 2 next described how they had observed their students "standing around during recess time, not engaging with each other, during classroom discussions hardly anyone would participate, they discontinued group work because students were not completing work together and sitting silently." Likewise Participant 3 stated, "there's a huge difference with the way kids interact with each other now and pre-pandemic…. One way I am trying to help improve my students social skills is by grouping them in small groups and doing lessons that way." Participant 3 emphasized they have seen "improvement with interacting with peers and getting more comfortable with volunteering and talking in class." Participant 5 had a similar response and shared their students "didn't know how to socialize with each other or have skills such as sharing, turn taking, following directions, keeping their hands to themselves, or being kind…. My students seemed to have a harder time socially within the school environment." Participant 7 shared how their students really struggled with "keeping their hands to themselves and respecting others' space…. There was definitely an influx in restorative circles that went on in the classroom between peers." An artifact

shared by Participant 7 offered a restorative circles sample of how this conflict resolution strategy is used in the classroom with peers to help facilitate peer conflict and promote positive solutions and interactions.

Table 11

Frequency of Artifacts for Initiating and Maintaining Social Relationships/Interactions

Artifact	Frequency	Source
Restorative circles sample	11	P7

Peer Reinforcement/Encouragement From Peers

Half of the participants said peer reinforcement and encouragement from peers had an impact on their students' self-efficacy. Peer reinforcement appeared to a component that contributed to student self-efficacy. Participant 1 shared how they implement a "peer reinforcement system in their classroom by adding pom-poms to a jar when students are caught being respectful and helpful towards one another." They emphasized how much this system has "improved student performance and added a more positive vibe to the classroom…. Students seem to be more willing to participate in group discussion, their working together more, and less students are arguing over things." Participant 3 shared "when their friends say something positive to them I see kids more willing to try." Peers can have a huge impact on students. "Students who surround themselves with peers who try their best and who are high performing are doing better in school" said Participant 4. Likewise, Participant 9 reported that "peer encouragement helps especially with those tasks that are harder for some." An example of a time when peer encouragement really made a difference occurred

> when [Participant 9's] class was doing the jog-a-thon and one of the students who has a hard time running and did not want to run but had over a dozen students cheering them on so they participated and completed the jog-a-thon.

Participant 10 concluded the "peer reinforcement system they use in class seems to really encourage their students to help and be kind to others because they want to earn their reward at the end of the month." Some behaviors Participant 10 shared that they have seen their students do is "helping students who have a harder time reading, helping others get their materials out, putting homework in homework folders, sharing, encouraging others, and taking turns."

Morning Check Ins/Interacting with Students

Fifty percent of participants referenced morning check-ins and talking with their students as social connections that affected their students' self-efficacy. Specifically, Participant 1 emphasized how one major factor that affected their students' self-efficacy was:

> providing morning check-ins with them to see how they were doing and just telling them that they are awesome and telling them to have great days…. I noticed the more positive interactions the students received impacted them academically, and socially.

Participant 1 continued on to share how they:

> could notice a different in student performance based on how that student was being talked to…. For example, if students are receiving positive feedback they are going to be more willing to try versus a student who consistently hears negative feedback.

Participant 2 shared how they:

> provide multiple different check-in opportunity for their students because they noticed students would arrive at school and appear to be struggling with either an issue at home, or friends and needed someone to check in with them before going to class.

They added, “most of my students utilize a check-in with me.” Participant 3 added their students benefit when they say “encouraging phrases to them such as Keep going! You’re so close! You got this! You can do it! So, I try to say these to motivate my students and interact positively with them.” Additionally, Participant 10 shared, “praising student success was something I noticed motivated my students so I started to praise them for their accomplishments and good choices making.” Participant 1 shared an artifact of an email from the administrator expressing interest of a check-in for a student with an IEP due to parent concerns expressed at drop off.

Table 12

Frequency of Artifacts for Morning Check Ins/Interacting with Students

Artifact	Frequency	Source
Email from parent about student check-in	14	P1

Research Question 4

Research question 3 asked, *How do special education teachers describe the impact of special education students returning to school after being online for two years with regard to academic achievement?* Table 13 highlights the three codes that emerged from the data along with frequency and sources.

Table 13

Frequency of Codes and Sources for Research Question #4

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Performing lower in English Language Arts	29	8
2. Learning/understanding new concepts	20	7
3. Performing higher in math	17	4
Emerging theme: lack of academic achievement during this transition period.		

After analyzing the data the researcher found three major codes related to the research question: (a) performing lower in English Language Arts, (b) learning/understanding new concepts, and (c) performing higher in math. The main theme that emerged from the data and codes was that students' self-efficacy was affected due to a lack of academic achievement during this transition period.

Performing Lower in English Language Arts

Out of the participants interviewed, 80% said they have seen students performing worse in the area of English Language Arts. "Most of my students are struggling with reading, and reading comprehension" said Participant 2. The participant continued to highlight how a "portion of my students were remote learning during first and part of second grade during the time students normally learn how to read. A lot of our students are struggling because they missed out on proper phonics instruction." Likewise, Participant 3 shared how "reading is an area that a lot of my students struggle with especially the comprehension part. Students tend to get lost and need redirecting and prompting back to the text and by then they're checked out." Similarly, Participant 4 shared that their students "really struggle with ELA content and writing" and noted that "students who are reading below grade level are less likely to keep trying to read and that's when I see a lot of shut downs." Participant 5 expressed major concerns that

"reading was probably the greatest negatively impacted academic area for my students" and shared how they experience "a lot of students shutting down more when faced with reading assignments and tasks." Participant 5 explained how they "try to motivate their students but a lot are so far behind grade level it's easier to quit or shut down." Participant 7 talked about "changing my students' ELA goals due to lack of progress being made" and emphasized how many "IEP amendments were had to adjust students' ELA goals in order for them to make progress on goals and grade level standards." Additionally, Participant 8 shared how their students are "struggling with reading and reading comprehension and are seeing a lot of students giving up in the areas their struggling with."

Learning/Understanding New Concepts

More than half of participants, 70%, referenced the topic of students having difficulty with learning and understanding new concepts, which contributed to the impact on their self-efficacy. Participant 1 pointed out how "students seem to be having a harder time with understanding new things especially as the concepts start to get harder." They continued to explain how they "have a lot of kids who shut down because they are not understanding the harder concepts and shutting down with harder tasks." Similarly, Participant 3 explained, "if a task is at their level and their familiar with it they will get started and put forth effort, once the task is challenging or requires a lot of thinking they give up." Likewise, Participant 10 talked about "multi-step problems" and explained how "the more steps to a problem the higher chances of losing participation and interest." For example, Participant 10 said, "teaching the kids the commutative property in math has been difficult because of the multi-steps students have to follow. They give up after the

first or second step." Participant 5 talked how "hard it can be at times to teach new material because students seem to have a hard time comprehending what is being asked especially with reading comprehension questions." Participant 7 explained how "academic learning with her young ones is difficult," noting that "it is hard for them to handle new learning like learning their sounds and letters." They went on to point out how "it's a lot for them to remember all of this information and I think it's overwhelming some of them so they shut down or tantrum."

Performing Higher in Math

Less than half of participants, 40%, referenced the topic of students performing better in math which is helping the impact on student self-efficacy skills. Some of the "easier tasks for students are math tasks" claims Participant 2. They continued on to share how "math concepts seem to be concepts that students are most familiar with and comfortable with. Numbers are numbers and stay pretty consistent the concepts build upon each other." Participant 3 shared how "students seem more prone to answering and participating in math discussion questions." They added how they have "observed students quicker to answer and participate with math content and seem to enjoy their math group work compared to ELA groups." The participant shared how they started incorporating math groups into the day because they "noticed more engagement and peer learning with math groups compared to ELA groups." Participant 6 pointed out how "students are scoring higher on their math tests and benchmarks compared to their ELA tests and benchmarks." Lastly, Participant 9 discussed how "math is a more universal subject" meaning it is a subject that is "easier for our English language learners to follow along and progress quicker in." During the interview, Participant 9 shared an artifact of

test scores from their students comparing math and English Language Arts benchmarks from trimester 1 and trimester 2 showing that their students are performing better in math.

Table 14

Frequency of Artifacts for Performing Higher in Math

Artifact	Frequency	Source
ELA versus math scores	11	P9

General Findings: Changes in Self-Efficacy

Table 15 highlights the three codes that emerged from the data followed along with their frequency and sources.

Table 15

Frequency of Codes and Sources for General Finding

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Yes, a change with student self-efficacy	23	8
2. Lack of learned self-efficacy skills during their time at home.	19	7
3. Students put forth less effort/quicker to give up/complete tasks and assignments.	17	5
Overall theme: diminished self-efficacy		

While analyzing the data, the researcher found three major codes related to the research questions: (a) yes, a change with student self-efficacy; (b) lack of learned self-efficacy skills during their time at home; and (c) students put forth less effort/quicker to give up/complete tasks and assignments. Special education teachers saw diminished self-efficacy with their students between their time at home and returning to in-person learning.

Yes, A Change with Student Self-Efficacy

Special education teachers have seen a change with student self-efficacy; this phenomenon was referenced most when analyzing the data. Out of the 10 participants, eight (80%) mentioned seeing a change with student self-efficacy. Participants discussed how they have noticed a change between student self-efficacy skills from their time at home to their return to in person education. Forty percent of participants answered quickly with a "Yes!" Participant 3 said they had "definitely seen a change in self-efficacy among their students." Participant 4 elaborated that they "noticed students struggling with self-efficacy skills in comparison to pre pandemic skills." Additionally, Participant 7 claimed they had "seen a huge change among their students who they had in second grade who are now in sixth grade." They explained how they saw a "negative difference in their demeanor, effort, behavior, attention, and social skills." Participant 9 claimed, "there's a huge deficiency when it comes to my students' self-efficacy skills now. They are pretty non-existent with most of my students." Participant 1 indicated that they "have seen more students needing help with these skills now than pre-COVID."

Lack of Learned Self-Efficacy Skills During Their Time at Home

The topic of students lacking learned self-efficacy skills while at home was referenced by 70% of participants. Special education teachers indicated that while students were learning at home, away from school, they did not learn some of these skills they would have normally learned if they had been in a classroom. Participant 1 said, "school is a place for these kids to learn these skills." They continued on to explain that "some students returned and their efficacy skills were fine because they had parents at home to help support and foster those skills but not all students had that." Participant 5

shared, “students are trying to catch up with skills that they missed or have not learned yet such as goal setting, task analysis, and being able to reflect on one-self.” Participant 8 stated, “the time at home was just enough time to impact efficacy skills for students that are having a lasting impact on their overall performance..” They continued to explain that the “decrease in motivation and willingness to try are impacting students overall.”

Students Put Forth Less Effort/Quicker to Give Up/Complete Tasks and Assignments

Out of the participants, 50% of special education teachers referenced students putting forth less effort and being quicker to give up or complete tasks or assignments as a change they have seen in student self-efficacy between their time at home and their return to in person education. Participant 1 explained how their students “have a harder time completing tasks and often times do not want to finish class work.” They added, “homework is even harder for students to complete and turn in. I hardly ever get homework back from my students.” Participant 3 stated “a lot of the kids are putting forth less effort and they’re quicker to give up.” Additionally Participant 5 said, “students who are already behind are less likely to want to get their work done and given most of my students are below grade level it is hard to motivate them to attempt those harder tasks and assignments.” Participant 8 shared that their students “need someone to monitor them and help keep them focused and on task to complete in-class assignments.” Lastly, Participant 10 emphasized the need for “additional prompting and reinforcement rewards such as items the student can work for once an assignment or task is completed.” Participant 1 shared an artifact of students’ missing assignments list, which reflected more than half of students missing 10 or more classwork/homework assignments since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year.

Table 16

Frequency of Artifacts Students Put Forth Less Effort/Quicker to Give Up/Complete Tasks and Assignments

Artifact	Frequency	Source
Missing Assignment List	7	P1

Observations

The researcher completed three observations with three of the participants from the interviews (Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 7) in their respective school districts located in Orange County, California. The observations lasted approximately 45 minutes each. During the observations the researcher considered the following criteria:

- Are teachers interacting with their students (asking questions, talking with them)?
- Are teachers engaging in active listening skills when students are talking?
- Are teachers open to change in order to respond to the needs of the students?

Table 17

Participants 1, 2, and 7 Observational Data

	Interacting with their students?	Engaging in active listening skills?	Open to change for student needs?
Participant 1	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 2	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 7	Yes	Yes	Yes

Participant 1

Participant 1 was observed on 1/9/24 for 45 minutes in the teacher's classroom. During the observation there were nine students present and the class was engaged in a reading activity. Participant 1 was observed to be heavily engaged with her students. She were constantly checking in with students to see if they understood directions, if they

needed further directions, and if they needed any help. Multiple different students approached the teacher and the teacher looked them in the eye when they were talking, and repeating back for clarification therefore high levels of active listening skills were observed with student interactions. Lastly, a student appeared to be having a difficult time and needed a break. The teacher was very quick to respond and accommodate this need, and saved the worksheet the student was working on for another time.

Participant 2

The observation occurred on 1/10/24 for approximately 45 minutes in the teachers classroom. During the time of the observation there were approximately 12 students in the classroom and they were engaged in a math lesson. The teacher checked in multiple different times with the students to ensure their understanding of the concept of greater than and less than. The teacher often walked around the students' desks to ensure they were copying the notes, engaging in small talk with them, which made some students laugh. When students were called on to participate, the teacher looked them in the eye, and would nod their head to show they were following along to what the student was saying. During this time students were being pulled for speech and occupational therapy services in which the teacher would modify (assign minimal parts) and/or save the student's work for them for when they got back, which demonstrated flexibility and willingness to meet the students' needs.

Participant 7

The final observation was completed on 1/12/24 for approximately 45 minutes in the teacher's classroom. During the time of the observation the special education teacher was working with a student on their IEP goals. The special education teacher was

observed to engage with the student by sitting next to them, talking to them, and showing them reinforcers the student could work for. The student was having a difficult time and did not want to complete some of the work being presented to them. Participant 7 listened to the student express their frustration and asked how they could help. Participant 7 gave the student a few minutes and asked if they wanted to use the restroom. The teacher was actively listening to the student and trying to meet their needs. The student returned from the restroom and began to tantrum. Participant 7 guided the student over towards the calming corner and did a calming strategy such as deep breathing to help calm the student down. The student did not return to baseline during the time of the observation. Participant 7 had to modify what they were going to work on to meet the student's needs.

The three observations confirmed the participants' level of involvement with their special education students. Therefore, the participants are a valid source of understanding perspectives of special education students returning to school post-pandemic and the impact on academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections.

Summary

The chapter began by revisiting the purpose statement, research questions, and methodology. This phenomenological study triangulated the data from 10 interviews, three observations, and eight artifacts that addressed special education teachers' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections. The analysis of the data sources yielded a total of 18 codes and 387 frequencies. The researcher concluded with six major themes.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V summarizes this research study and begins by revisiting the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, population, and sample. The key findings for each research question are discussed, after which the researcher draws conclusions and outlines implications for action. The chapter concludes with further research recommendations, closing remarks, and reflections from the researcher.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 special education educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the COVID-19 pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections in order to answer the following questions:

1. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?
3. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do special education teachers describe the impact on students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine K-6 special education teachers' perceptions of the impact on students with disabilities

returning to school post-pandemic. The researcher collected three types of data: interviews, observations, and artifacts. The primary source of data collection was interviews. Interviews were conducted through Zoom video conferencing and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Observations were completed with three participants for a duration of about 2 hours and took place in their classrooms at their respective school districts located in Orange County, California. A total of nine artifacts were collected from four participants during and after the interviews, including a missing assignments list, email exchanges, growth mindset lessons, classroom presentations, behavior contracts, restorative circles sample, and reading versus math scores. Collecting the other two sources of data (observations and artifacts) allowed the researcher to triangulate the data to identify and support patterns and themes across multiple sources of data.

The study population consisted of 38,000 special education teachers in the United States. The population was narrowed down to a target population of 8,730 special education teachers in California. The sample was drawn from 1,830 special education teachers who teach in Orange County, CA. The study used purposeful and convenience sampling to select participants for the study. Participants had to meet certain criteria in order to be considered for the study. This criteria consisted of teachers who: taught before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic; taught students with mild to moderate disabilities in grades K-6; and teach in school districts located in Orange County, CA. The study was narrowed to Orange County, CA due to accessibility and convenience for the researcher. The researcher had access to teacher directories from two school districts in Orange County, CA from which the researcher inquired participants from. The researcher sent emails to participants and used SurveyMonkey to gather demographic

information to see who was interested in participating and/or met the criteria. The first 10 respondents who met the criteria were selected for interviews and received invitations to participate in the study. A sample size of 10 participants was considered appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Major Findings

After analyzing the data, codes, and themes the researcher concluded with four major findings and an overall finding related to students with disabilities and their self-efficacy in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement.

Major Finding 1: Mindset

The first major finding of the study related to student mindsets and found that promoting and teaching a growth mindset makes a difference for students with disabilities and their self-efficacy skills. Out of the 10 participants, eight (80%) expressed in their interviews how important it was to encourage students with disabilities to have a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. Participants mentioned this theme 29 times. Specifically, Participant 1 emphasized how "encouraging my students to have a growth mindset has really had a positive impact on their self-efficacy skills versus a fixed a mindset." Participant 5 shared how "promoting this type of mindset has encouraged students to attempt new tasks, be open to making mistakes, have positive self-concepts, and enhance creativity." Likewise, 70% of participants referenced growth mindset enhancing self-efficacy among students with disabilities. In particular, Participant 5 shared, "my students with growth mindsets are more willing to attempt a hard task whereas another one of my students with a fixed mindset is more likely to shut down and not attempt to finish." Additionally, Participant 6 shared, "growth mindsets help with

self-efficacy skills because it promotes a mindset to try, and doesn't let failure hinder their abilities or motivation." Fifty percent of participants mentioned that a lack of confidence and motivation among students with disabilities was hindering self-efficacy skills. Participant 1 shared an artifact on a positive affirmations lesson they were conducting in their class daily with their students to help promote growth mindset and positive self-concepts to help increase self-efficacy skills.

Recent studies have shown that the shift to remote learning and loss of in-person access to school, teachers, services, and peers negatively affected students with disabilities and their mental health, leading to an increase in negative feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, sad, unmotivated, or worried (Brundin, 2021; Patrick et al., 2020; Verlenden et al., 2021). When students returned to school, special education teachers needed to shift student mindsets in order to restore and build upon their self-efficacy skills. Teachers have found that promoting a growth mindset is key to fostering self-efficacy skills among students with disabilities.

This major finding supports the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura asserted that an individual's belief in their capability to execute a specific task is a major component of self-efficacy. Bandura believed a "person's set of beliefs would determine how well one could execute a plan of action in prospective situations" (p. 2). Bandura associated high self-efficacy skills with higher resiliency levels, healthier lifestyles, and higher educational performance (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). Therefore, encouraging students to have a growth mindset can help to enhance self-efficacy, which increases their chances of attempting harder tasks, staying motivated, and

persevering. Utilizing a growth mindset with students with disabilities can enhance self-efficacy skills within the classroom.

Major Finding 2: **Behavior**

The second major finding of the study addressed behaviors, concluding that behaviors such as task initiation/completion, and regulating emotions when responding to different situations impacted students with disabilities self-efficacy skills. Specifically, 70% of participants referenced task completion (initiating/finishing tasks) 31 times as the number one behavior that has affected student self-efficacy skills. Participant 2 shared how their "students have difficulty with starting assignments or tasks especially if the task or assignment is related to a new concept or a concept they struggle with" and added "many students need prompting to start an assignment or reminders to turn in." Additionally, Participant 4 shared how "students will sit there and wait for me to write the answer on the board, or fill in their worksheet with random answers so they can move on to another activity." Participant 6 also mentioned a "lack of returned homework among more than half of their students."

Out of the participants, 50% referenced a lack of emotion regulation skills among their students with disabilities 24 times, indicating this as another behavior affecting their self-efficacy skills. Half of the participants felt this lack of emotion regulation skills affected students' self-efficacy skills because it was "harder for them to control their emotions which impacted their behavior that led to negative self-concepts and impacted peer relationships," according to Participant 1. Thirty percent of participants shared how students are lacking these skills because of their time at home. Participant 1 expressed how "these skills were not taught during remote learning therefore we are seeing more

students get frustrated easily, tantrum, and engage in aggressive behaviors." To help with the increase of these two behaviors, participant 1 shared artifacts of behavior contracts they use to target these behaviors and expressed how "these contracts help target these behaviors and bring awareness to the student on other ways they can handle the situation and provide a section for them to reflect and earn points."

A study conducted by Sahranavard et al. (2018) found a strong correlation between self-regulation skills and higher academic performance. The more self-regulation skills a student possesses, the higher their desired academic performance will be. A regulated individual is able to make sound decisions, set attainable goals, and achieve those goals, all of which foster self-efficacy skills. This finding supports Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy in regard to the effect self-efficacy has on choice of activities/tasks, effort, and persistence. According to Bandura, "self-efficacy helps one overcome obstacles that would interfere with utilizing those innate abilities to achieve goals" (as cited in Lopez-Garrido, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, Bandura argued that self-efficacy can provide the basis for motivation and accomplishment. When a student's self-efficacy is affected, it influences behavior and what they want or do not want to do (task completion), motivation levels, and emotion regulation skills.

Major Finding 3: **Social Connections**

The third major finding addressed the area of social connections and found that positive structures, people, and overall environment were social connections that affected the self-efficacy skills of their students with disabilities. More than half (70%) of participants felt that social interactions and initiating/maintaining social relationships had an impact on their students' self-efficacy skills. Participant 1 shared that, "during their

time at home, many students did not have in person conversations with their peers and communicated through text, emails, and messenger." Once students returned to school, they were "very unsure of themselves, shy, and often would not engage with each other." Participants referenced this back to "self-efficacy skills being impacted and students feeling less confident about themselves and their abilities to interact with their peers."

Half of the participants referenced peer reinforcement and encouragement 21 times as a component that contributed to higher student self-efficacy skills. Participant 1 shared how they incorporate peer reinforcement systems in their classrooms that "encourage students to be kind, respectful, and comment upon each other's abilities or things they may like about that student." Additionally, participant 3 expressed when they "see students encouraging their peers to try to answer a question or participate in a discussion it motivates that student to try, therefore they try." Positive social interactions and environments are important when fostering self-efficacy skills. Half of participants referenced how morning check-ins with students and interacting with them has affected students with disabilities in a positive way. "When students are talked to in a positive and encouraging way they are going to want to perform and I have noticed do perform," said Participant 1. Participant 10 shared, "praising student success is something that I have noticed motivates my students."

A Gallup Poll conducted in May 2020 found 45% of parents expressed their child had experienced a disconnection from teachers and peers, noted this as a "major challenge" (Calderon, 2020, p. 2). Students need to be in a setting with their teachers and peers and benefit heavily from social interactions. DeArmond et al. (2021) found that educators believed the lack of social interaction among students during remote learning

would hinder social skills development. Participants from this study claim students struggled with social interactions and relationships, which affected their self-efficacy skills in the area of social connections.

This finding supports Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy in regard to the source of efficacy of verbal persuasion. When an individual is verbally encouraged by others it fosters self-efficacy. Participants witnessed this phenomenon in terms of peer reinforcement and encouragement. When students with disabilities were encouraged by peers to try something or told an encouraging phrase such as "you can do it," or "you got this," they try harder on a difficult task or work harder to participate when they might not do so otherwise.

Major Finding 4: **Academic Achievement**

The fourth major finding from this study addressed the area of academic achievement, finding a lack of academic achievement among students with disabilities during this transition period that affected self-efficacy skills. Specifically, 80% of participants referenced students performing lower in ELA 29 times. Participants expressed concern for their students having "difficulty in the area of reading and reading comprehension." They added how "a lot of students missed out on in-person reading lessons and are struggling with ELA." Participants emphasized this is an academic area that student self-efficacy skills have been impacted due to "not being able to read, answer comprehension questions, write essays, etc." As "students' progress in grades the content gets harder and more students are shutting down and not trying," said Participant 4.

Learning and understanding new concepts is another area that is affecting student self-efficacy. Seventy percent of participants referenced the topic of students having

difficulty with learning and understanding new concepts 20 times. Of these participants, they all referenced seeing an increase in their students shutting down with new and harder material. Most of the participants talked discussed the students they are working with are "already behind grade level standards so presenting new material is difficult and many students will not attempt to do the work independently." "Concepts with multi-step problems are more likely to lose student attention and participation," said Participant 10.

In educational productivity theory, Herbert Walberg (1984) theorized how students' physiological characteristics and environment influence educational performance; therefore, when students returned to school post-pandemic, their environment had been affected, which in turn affected educational performance. During remote learning, the environment was not a typical classroom; instead, it consisted of learning remotely using a conference call software system that delivered instruction remotely.

The finding supports Bandura's (19777) theory of self-efficacy in that performance outcomes contribute to self-efficacy skills. Students' self-efficacy skills in regard to academic achievement were affected due to students not feeling competent enough to complete an ELA task due to not having the proper knowledge or skill set to complete. Therefore, as many participants expressed, students would give up and shut down on concepts or tasks that were too difficult.

Major Finding 5: **Student Self-Efficacy**

The fifth major finding related to the overall theme of self-efficacy among students with disabilities and found that most participants (80%) saw diminished self-efficacy skills when students returned to school after being online for 2 years.

Participants described during the students' time at home there was a lack of self-efficacy skills being learned, and students are putting forth less effort and appear to be quicker to give up when faced with difficult tasks. Participant 4 shared their experience with their students and compared their self-efficacy skills to pre-pandemic skills, explaining how they saw a "negative difference in their demeanor, effort, behavior, attention, and social skills." Likewise, Participant 7 shared their experience with their students who were in second grade and are now in sixth grade, describing their current self-efficacy skills as "non-existent."

Students appear to have been affected in the area of self-efficacy. Participant 8 emphasized the "decrease in motivation and willingness" among their students as "one of the biggest self-efficacy skills that has been impacted." Half of participants talked about the lack of completed classwork and homework assignments being turned in due to a lack of motivation and effort. One participant shared an artifact with the researcher that supported the statements about missing classwork and homework assignments; the artifact reflected more than half of the students missing 10 or more assignments.

Cattelino et al. (2021) stated that educators should support self-efficacy behavior among their students because it promotes positive feelings, motivation, and coping strategies that can help individuals through everyday life. The participants' responses align with this statement from previous research on student self-efficacy and support the need for self-efficacy skills. Most participants (80%) have experienced the impact of these diminished skills among their students.

This major finding supports Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory in regard to the influences that contribute to the increase/decrease of self-efficacy skills. In this case, the

"four influences (experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological feedback)" were all affected, meaning some students with disabilities were hardly gaining these skills though any of these influences during their time at home (Lopez-Garrido, 2023, p. 2). When they returned, educators were able to witness the change in self-efficacy skills.

Unexpected Finding: Performing Higher In Math

After thoroughly analyzing the qualitative data, one unexpected finding emerged. Out of the participants, 40% shared they have noticed students are performing better in math and observed math tasks as being easier for students due to numbers being universal. Participants referenced students performing higher in math a total of 17 times. Participant 9 emphasized how "math is a universal subject meaning our English Language Learners are having less difficulty in this area compared to reading." Additionally, Participant 6 shared how their students are "scoring higher on math benchmarks compared to ELA benchmarks." To support this statement, a participant shared an artifact that compared test scores for math and ELA from the first and second trimester of the 2023-2024 school year. The test score artifact was referenced a total of 11 times throughout the interview. Lastly, the participants expressed how students appeared to engage and participate more in math groups compared to ELA groups and shared how they have incorporated more of these groups to help facilitate learning, social skills, and working with others.

Conclusions

The major findings concluded with six conclusions based on the perceptions of K-6 special education teachers' perceptions on students with disabilities returning to school

after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The six conclusions are presented and supported by the qualitative data and literature.

Conclusion 1

Promoting a growth mindset among students with disabilities is crucial when looking to enhance their self-efficacy skills. Many students returned to school after being online for 2 years with fixed mindsets that hindered their development of self-efficacy skills. Incorporating activities such as positive affirmations is a great and effective way for educators to enhance the positivity among students and restore those "I can!" attitudes.

Instilling a growth mindset among students with disabilities is important. Dr. Carol Dweck researched the effects of growth mindset in education and found that a growth mindset drives motivation and achievement (Transforming Education, 2020a). Ultimately, when students believe they can get smarter or learn something, their effort and motivation towards achieving that task increases. This in turn will have a positive impact on student self-efficacy skills. Special education teachers shared when student mindsets changed from "I can't" to I can," they witnessed more students willing to try difficult tasks and not shut down as quickly. After the shift to remote learning, educators and parents saw an increase in negative feelings, such as depression, sadness, and feeling overwhelmed (Patrick et al., 2020). Based upon the findings of this study and previous literature, promoting a growth mindset is an important strategy that educators can introduce in their classrooms to help students regain and build their self-concept and self-efficacy skills.

Conclusion 2

Overall, task completion and emotion regulation skills have contributed significantly to the impact on the self-efficacy skills of students with disabilities. Since returning to school post-pandemic, special education teachers are witnessing more students having behavior problems with task initiation (starting/completing assignments). These behaviors have escalated to the point where educators have created systems like behavior contracts to help target missing assignment behavior and encourage student self-efficacy skills. Jimenez (2023) stated that educators in California have seen an increase in misbehavior and are unsure of how to handle it. Additionally, educators have been writing more referrals, suspending or expelling students, ticketing students, even arresting students more than before the pandemic.

Behavior heavily influences self-efficacy because self-efficacy influences one's environment and behavior (Bandura, 1977). If students are continuously not following instructions, failing to turn in assignments, and getting physical or verbal with others, these actions are going to affect their self-efficacy skills in a negative way. Students will be more prone to not trying, giving up, and shutting down. Encouraging the use of emotion regulation skills can help students manage these behaviors and emotions in a way that will positively affect student self-efficacy.

Conclusion 3

The absence of social connections among students with disabilities after being online for 2 years affected their self-efficacy skills. Since returning to school, special education teachers have noticed an impact on their students' social skills, specifically those skills related to initiating and maintaining social relationships. Teachers explained

how a lot of students will stand around at recess by themselves and not interact with others; even during group work, student interactions are lower than they were pre-pandemic.

However, teachers did notice a positive difference in efficacy skills when peer reinforcement and encouragement were utilized. Teachers expressed the benefits of using a peer reinforcement system in the class and shared the difference it has made in student performance and overall moods. It is important for students to receive encouragement and reassurance from their peers, which in turn increases self-efficacy. Solomon and Wahler (1973) agree that peer reinforcement and student behavior are highly correlated, meaning peers can have an influence on student behavior and performance. Therefore, positive reinforcement is a strategy that can be used to nurture self-efficacy skills. Additionally, special education teachers saw the positive impact on self-efficacy when students utilized morning check-ins with designated staff members and noted the difference in student performance when interactions between teachers and students were positive and motivating. Hall (2017) concurred that the teacher-student relationship enables students to be more connected to school and perform better academically.

Conclusion 4

Lack of academic achievement is another area that affected the self-efficacy of students with disabilities after being online for 2 years. From the data, the academic area that appears to be the most affected is ELA. Most participants (80%) referenced ELA as the most affected academic area among their students. In particularly, students who were struggling previously in the area of reading are more likely to shut down when presented with ELA-type assignments. Student self-efficacy skills are affected, which is why

special education teachers are experiencing more students shutting down or not trying when faced with difficult tasks or new content.

Resistance to learning new concepts is contributing to the impact on student self-efficacy skills. A majority of special education teachers shared that when new content is taught, a good portion of their students shut down and give up before even trying. Self-efficacy skills are so crucial because they help the student believe they need to attempt the task and/or assignment. When self-efficacy skills are affected, lack of motivation and perseverance is the outcome. Cattelino et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of educators supporting and fostering the growth of students' self-efficacy skills to promote positive feelings, motivation, and coping strategies. These type of skills can help students deal with everyday challenges.

Conclusion 5

Students with disabilities returned to school post-COVID with diminished self-efficacy skills. Special education teachers noticed a change in student self-efficacy skills due to a change in their behavior, demeanor, effort, and social skills. More than half of participants (70%) felt this was due to a lack of self-efficacy skills being learned and used during remote learning. The 2 years of remote learning was a significant amount of time to influence these skills. Research suggests that students with low self-efficacy are less likely to participate in class, not put forth effort, and give up easily, whereas a student with high self-efficacy is going to be willing to participate in class more, put forth effort, and persist on difficult tasks (Transforming Education, 2020b).

According to half of participants, students with disabilities appear to be having difficulty staying motivated and are more likely to give up on difficult tasks and/or

assignments. They benefit from teacher- or aide-directed prompting or redirecting back to the task. Being able to prompt and redirect students is a strategy that could not be used during remote learning, which many teachers reported hindered their student's learning (Khan et al., 2021). Now that students with disabilities have returned to school after being online for 2 years, it is imperative to restore their self-efficacy skills so they can navigate both everyday challenges and times of crisis.

Conclusion 6

Academic achievement was affected by the pandemic. Findings revealed that math was an academic area that impacted students with disabilities' self-efficacy in a positive way. Forty percent of participants referenced their students with disabilities performing higher on math tests in comparison to ELA tests and attempting more difficult math tasks versus more students shutting down with difficult ELA tasks. The participants felt this phenomenon could be due to the fact that numbers are universal. English language learners were less affected by math tests and tasks in comparison to ELA tests and tasks.

However, research from McKinsey & Company found that students only learned a portion of math and reading concepts they would have typically learned during remote learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Therefore, students were "approximately 3 months behind in math and 1.5 months behind in reading" when they returned to in-person learning for the 2020-2021 school year (Dorn et al., 2020). As a whole educators are seeing regression in academic areas; however, some participants from this study are noticing the opposite among their students.

Implications for Action

Implication for Action 1: Incorporate/Promote Growth Mindset

Based on the conclusion that students with disabilities benefit from a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset, it is recommended that teachers incorporate and promote growth mindset values within the classroom. Promoting and incorporating these values in the classroom will help to enhance self-efficacy skills such as persisting through difficult tasks, learning from mistakes, and motivation. These skills will help support students beyond the classroom and enable them to be resilient and ready to solve problems. School districts need to provide professional development and resources on growth mindset, addressing how and why they should be used in the classroom to foster self-efficacy skills and overall student performance. A great and efficient way districts can provide resources on growth mindset is providing them access to a professional development tool kit on growth mindset provided by Transforming Education. This free Growth Mindset Tool Kit allows teachers access to a facilitator guide, a presentation on growth mindset, and two different introduction handouts on growth mindset (Transforming Education, 2020a).

Implication for Action 2: Wellness Centers

Based on the conclusion that students with disabilities benefit from positive structures and people, it is recommended that schools create Wellness Centers on campus where students can go to check in with a staff member, de-escalate if they are upset, attend lunch bunches, join social skills groups, and seek out a trusted adult to talk to when needed. Providing a safe space for students contributes to an overall positive

environment: a factor that positively influences student self-efficacy. It is recommended for mental health professionals on campus oversee these designated Wellness Centers.

Implication for Action 3: Reading Intervention

Based on the conclusion that students with disabilities self-efficacy skills are most affected in the academic area of ELA, it is recommended that schools offer after-school reading intervention programs to those students who are below grade level standards. Offering this type of intervention can help rebuild student self-efficacy skills for reading. The school district should offer reading intervention programs to school sites and designated teachers at each school site should implement 8-week reading interventions. Improving student reading should lead to an increase in self-efficacy skills.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study contributed to the findings of K-6 special education teacher perceptions on students with disabilities returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The current study is a snapshot of the perceptions of K-6 special education teachers and invites future researchers to explore special education teacher perceptions on students returning to school after being online for 2 years. Based on the current data the following are recommended for future research:

- This study focused on K-6 special education teachers who taught in Orange County, CA. It is recommended for future studies to expand to other cities, and states to add to knowledge of students returning to school post-pandemic.
- This study involved only special education teachers who taught grades K-6. It is suggested for future research to expand to other grade levels such as middle,

high school, and college to compare similarities and differences among students.

- This study asked only special education teachers who taught in a Mild to Moderate (MM) program to participate in the study. It is suggested for future studies to incorporate special education teachers who teach Moderate to Severe (MS) programs to compare those perceptions of special education teachers who teach MM programs.
- This study investigated only special education teachers. It is recommended for future studies that teachers who teach general education be included in the sample. This will add to the growing research and allow researchers to compare impacts among students with disabilities and those with no disabilities.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

The undertaking of this dissertation has given me a chance to explore an area of interest and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of K-6 special education teachers on students with disabilities returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The time and effort put into this study has been worth the gains in research for this specific area with minimal research.

The data collected through this study can be used for the next few generations as we continue to tread away from the pandemic era. As a school psychologist, I have witnessed many discussions on COVID-19 and whether or not the spike in academic and behavioral issues stems from it. Although that question cannot be answered fully, the data

from this research suggests that student self-efficacy skills have diminished and the areas of mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement have all been affected since students have returned to school since being online for 2 years. Special education teachers in this study shared how most students with disabilities have been affected, offering specific examples that helped the researcher understand these experiences and why it has affected these students. This dissertation provides the opportunity for other researchers to expand and explore different areas, theories, and populations of interest.

The pandemic affected most individuals in some way, so it is imperative that researchers continue to pursue this area of research and determine the impact and severity and seek out ways to address the identified need. The field of education was heavily impacted by the pandemic and districts all around are still graveling to meet the needs of students. The pandemic was a recent event; therefore, research is still emerging and will continue to emerge over the upcoming years. It is crucial that researchers continue to pursue this area of research so current and future students receive the proper supports needed to thrive in our evolving educational system.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1.Overall have you seen a change in student self-efficacy between their time at home, due to covid, and their return to in person education?

Mindset (1)

2. What student mindsets do you feel impacted their self-efficacy and why?

Prompt*: What might be an experience where your students demonstrated their mindset revealing how their self-efficacy had been impacted? (How did this impact their self-efficacy?)*

What might be another experience that impacted your student's self-efficacy/mindset differently?

Behavior: (3)

3. Which behaviors do you feel impacted your students' self-efficacy and why?

Prompt: *What might be an observation you have had through instructional time, walkthroughs, etc. that demonstrated student behavior and its impact on self-efficacy? (In what ways did this impact your students' self-efficacy?)*

What might be another experience that impacted your students' self-efficacy differently? In what ways did that impact your students' self-efficacy?

Social Connections: (2)

4. What social connections do you feel impacted your students' self-efficacy and why?

Prompt*: What might be a situation where your student's environment, such as teachers, parents, administrators, peers, etc. impacted their self-efficacy? (In what ways did this impact their self-efficacy?)*

Academic Achievement: (4)

5. Which academic achievements by students impacted their self-efficacy and why?

Prompt*: What might be an experience in which your students were able to perform academic tasks successfully? (What are some factors that lead to your student's success or lack of success?)*

6. Is there anything I missed that you would like to share?

Demographic Questions

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Ethnicity:
4. Highest level of education:
5. What special education credential do you hold?
6. How long have you been a mild to moderate special education teacher?
7. What current(s) grade do you teach?

APPENDIX B

Field-Test Questions

Interviewer Reflection Questions

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?
3. Going into it, did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?
4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
5. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?
6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

Observer Field Test Questions

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?
3. Going into it, did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?
4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
5. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?
6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

APPENDIX C

Field Test Participant Feedback Questions

While conducting the interview you should take notes of their clarification request or comments about not being clear about the question. After you complete the interview ask your field test interviewee the following clarifying questions. **Try not to make it another interview; just have a friendly conversation**. Either script or record their feedback so you can compare with the other two members of your team to develop your feedback report on how to improve the interview questions.

Before the brief post interview discussion, give the interviewee a copy of the interview protocol. If their answers imply that some kind of improvement is necessary, follow up for specificity.

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to answer the question?
2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was ok?
3. Were the questions clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked? *If the interview indicates some uncertainty, be sure to find out where in the interview it occurred.*
4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing or not properly explained? Please give specifics.
5. And finally, did I appear comfortable during the interview… (I'm pretty new at this)?

APPENDIX D

Thematic Interview Protocol with Script

Start Interview: "My name is Andrea Xenios and I am a school psychologist. I am a doctoral candidate at University of Massachusetts Global in the area of Organizational Leadership. I am a part of a team conducting research to examine the K-6 special education educators' perceptions on students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for two years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Our team is conducting interviews with special education teachers like yourself. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully, will provide a clear picture of special education teachers' perceptions on students returning to school post-pandemic and will add to the body of research currently available. The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. I will be reading most of what I say. The reason for this is to guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating leaders will be conducted pretty much in the same manner."

Informed Consent (*required for Dissertation Research*)

"I would like to remind you that any information obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). After I record and transcribe the data, I will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas. Did you receive the Informed Consent and University of Massachusetts Global Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?" *(collect the signed documents at this point, bring blanks in case they do not have it on hand, get it signed before proceeding)*

"We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point in time during the interview, you may ask that I skip a question or stop the interview altogether. For the ease of our discussion and accuracy, I will record the conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent. Do you have any questions before we begin? Just a reminder that this study is about your perceptions on students returning to school post-pandemic with regard to

behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections. Okay, let's get started, and thanks so much for your time."

The definitions for self-efficacy, behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections (and the questions for today) were sent out a week ago. (*Bring an extra copy and give it to them in case they do not have it in front of them)*.

(Introduce definition of key concepts before start and pause before moving on to the next one - so they can follow along. Suggestion: Thank you and we are now moving to the next section.)

Probes

Possible Probes,

1. *"Would you expand upon that a bit?"*
2. *"Do you have more to add?"*
3. *"What did you mean by ..."*
4. *"Why do think that was the case?"*
5. *"Could you please tell me more about…. "*
6. *"Can you give me an example of …."*
7. *"How did you feel about that?"*

When you review, please add others you think would be appropriate.

End Interview: "Thank you very much for your time. If you like, when the results of our research are known, we can send you a copy of our findings."

APPENDIX E

UMass Global University Institutional Review Board Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs, or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB Adopted

November 2013

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent

INFORMATION ABOUT: The perceptions of K-12 special education educators on the impact on special education students returning to school post-pandemic.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Andrea Xenios

PURPOSE OF STUDY*:*

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Andrea Xenios, a doctoral candidate of Organizational Leadership from the School of Education at University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K12 educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for two years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will include an interview with the identified student investigator. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete and will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience. The interview questions will pertain to your perceptions and your responses will be confidential. Each participant will have an identifying code and names will not be used in data analysis. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only.

I understand that:

a) The researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes safe-guarded in a locked file drawer or password protected digital file to which the researcher will have sole access.

b) The interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings, transcripts and notes taken by the researcher and transcripts from the interview will be destroyed

c) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not to participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

d) If I have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Andrea Xenios, at XXX@XXX.edu or by phone at XXX-XXX; or Dr. Hightower (chair) at XXX@XXX.edu.

e) No information that identifies you me will be released without my separate consent and all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, you I will be so informed and consent re-obtained. There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research.

f) If I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, University of Massachusetts Global, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_____ Date:

Signature of Participant

_____ Date:

Signature of Principal Investigator

APPENDIX G

CITI Certificate for Human Subjects Research

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 20-May-2022
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 48985932

This is to certify that:

Andrea Xenios

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Subjects Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Massachusetts Global

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

APPENDIX H

Synthesis Matrix

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
American Psychological Association. (2020). *Student mental health during and after COVID-19: How can schools identify youth who need support?*	X		X					
American Academy of Pediatrics. (2020) COVID-19 Guidance for safe schools and promotion of in-person learning Retrieved from: https://www.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools								
Alexander, J. (2021). *Supporting students and staff after COVID-19: Your trauma-sensitive back-to-school transition plan.* Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.	X	X	X					
An, Y., Kaplan-Rakowski, R., Yang, J., Conan, J., Kinard, W., & Daughrity, L. (2021). Examining K-12 teachers' feelings, experiences, and perspectives regarding online teaching during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Technology Research & Development*, 69(5), 2589-2613.	X	X	X					

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Aljohani, H. (2019). The role of self-efficacy in teaching students with intellectual disabilities: Perspectives from saudi arabia (Order No. 13902843). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Social Science Premium Collection. (2320953210). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/role-self-efficacy-teaching-students-with/docview/2320953210/se-2								
Arnold, D. T. (2012). The theory of social disruption. AuthorHouse.								
Artino, A. R. Jr. (2012). Academic self-efficacy: from educational theory to instructional practice. Perspect Med Educ. 2012 May;1(2):76-85. doi: 10.1007/s40037-012-0012-5. Epub 2012 Apr 11. PMID: 23316462; PMCID: PMC3540350.								
Asbury, K., Fox, L., Deniz, E., Code, A., & Toseeb, U. (2020). How is COVID-19 affecting the mental health of children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families? Journal of and Autism Developmental Disabilities, preprint, 1–9.	X		X					X
Averett, K. H. (2021). Remote learning, COVID-19, and children with disabilities. AERA Open, 7. Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23328584211058471#bibr41-23328584211058471	X	X	X					X
Baidoo, W. J. (2019, January 23). *Communication strategies as a basis of crisis management including the use of the internet as a delivery platform.* Ligs University, Hawaii, USA.								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Bandura A. Self-efficacy: the exercise of control. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company; 1997. [Google Scholar]								
Biglan, A. (1987). A behavior-analytic critique of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The Behavior Analyst, 10(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03392402								
Bonal, X., González, S. (2020). The impact of lockdown on the learning gap: family and school divisions in times of crisis. Int Rev Educ 66, 635–655 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09860-z								
Bubb, S., & Jones, M.A. (2020). Learning from the COVID-19 home-schooling experience: Listening to pupils, parents/careers and teachers. Improving Schools, 23(3), 209-222. https://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1270681&site=eds-live&scope=site								
Bullock, A., Coplan, R.J., & Bosacki, S. (2015). Exploring links between early childhood educators'psychological charactertistics and classroom management self-efficacy beliefs. Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 47(2), 175-183.								
Bureau of Labor Statistics, (2022). U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Special Education Teachers, at https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/special-education-teachers.htm								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023). Number of special education teachers in California. Retrieved from: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes252058.htm								
California Department of Education. (2023).	X	X	X					X
Calkins, L. (2022). Measuring social studies teacher self-efficacy: Development of a valid, reliable, and fair social studies self-efficacy scale (Order No. 29167753). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2713473804). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/measuring-social-studies-teacher-self-efficacy/docview/2713473804/se-2								
Cattelino E, Testa S, Calandri E, Fedi A, Gattino S, Graziano F, Rollero C, Begotti T. (2021). Self-efficacy, subjective well-being and positive coping in adolescents with regard to Covid-19 lockdown. Curr Psychol. 2021 Jun 20:1-12. doi: 10.1007/s12144-021-01965-4. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 34177208; PMCID: PMC8214713.								
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2022, August 19). *CDC Healthy Schools: Health and academics.*	X							
Center for Teaching. (2001). Teaching in times of crisis. Vanderbilt University. Retrieved from: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/crisis/								
Çevik, M., Bakioğlu, B. (2022). Investigating students' E-Learning attitudes in times of crisis (COVID-19 pandemic). Educ Inf Technol 27, 65–87 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-021-10591-3								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Chiemeke, Stella and Imafidor, Omokhagbo Mike. (2020). Web-based Learning In Periods of Crisis: Reflections on the Impact of COVID-19 (July 14, 2020). International Journal of Computer Science & Information Technology (IJCSIT) Vol 12, No 3, June 2020, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3650893				X	X	X	X	
Coombs, W. (2016). Situational crisis communication theory. (Vols. 1-2). SAGE Publications, Inc.								
Coombs, W., & Holladay, S. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16(2), 165–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/089331802237233								
Coombs, W. (2007). Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Corp Reputation Rev 10, 163–176 (2007). https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049								
Coombs, W. Timothy; Holladay, Sherry J. (October 1996). "Communication and Attributions in a Crisis: An Experimental Study in Crisis Communication." Journal of Public Relations Research. 8 (4): 279–295. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr0804_04.								
Crow, O. (2022). Education inequality during COVID-19: How remote learning is widening the achievement gap and spurring the need for judicial intervention [Article]. Boston College Law Review, 63(2), 713-752. https://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cja&AN=155479940&site=eds-live&scope=site								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Creswell, J. (2012). Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research. 4th ed. p. 142								
Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2013). Qualitative inquiry and research design : Choosing among five approaches (Fourth ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.								
Cullinane, C., & Montacute, R. (2020). COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #1: school shutdown. Sutton Trust.								
Cunningham, E. M. (2021). The relationships among student self-efficacy, teacher actions, and academic growth (Order No. 28721356). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2618860785). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/relationships-among-student-self-efficacy-teacher/docview/2618860785/se-2								
Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2023). Special Education Credentials. Retrieved from: https://www.ctc.ca.gov/credentials/creds/special-ed								
Davis, C. (2020). A multiple case study of female students' academic self-efficacy while participating in a middle school robotics program (Order No. 28157786). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Publicly Available Content Database; Social Science Premium Collection. (2544908727). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/multiple-case-study-female-students-academic-self/docview/2544908727/se-2								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
De La Cruz, M. (2022). Pandemic learning loss in California: Who are the most impacted after COVID-19 forced virtual learning.	X	X						
Donnelly, R. & Patrinos, H. A. (2022). Learning loss during Covid-19: An early systemic review. Prospects 51, 601-609.	X	X						
Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime.* McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime	X	X						
D'Souza, K. (2023). *How badly did the pandemic deepen California's early reading crisis?* EdSource. https://edsource.org/2022/how-badly-did-the-pandemic-deepen-californias-early-reading-crisis/680490	X	X						
Federici R., Vika K. (2020). Spørsmål til Skole-Norge: Analyser og resultater fra Utdanningsdirektoratets spørreundersøkelse til skoleledere, skoleeiere og lærere under korona-utbruddet 2020. Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education. https://www.udir.no/contentassets/865c9aebe7af4770ab520e65598cb474/raport13_2020.pdf								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Francis-Denton, C. (2023). General education teachers' descriptions of self-efficacy in a middle school inclusive classroom (Order No. 30316696). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2798454476). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/general-education-teachers-descriptions-self/docview/2798454476/se-2								
Fresno State Univeristy. (2023) Mild to Moderate Support Needs. School of Education. Retrieved from: https://www.fresno.edu/graduate/program/mild-moderate-support-needs#:~:text=Students%20with%20mild%20to%20moderate,sensory%20and%2For%20motor%20impairments.								
Gao, N., Hill, S. (2020). Remote learning for Engish learners and special needs students during COVID-19. Retrieved from: https://www.ppic.org/blog/remote-learning-for-english-learners-and-special-needs-students-during-covid-19/								
Grant, C., Osanloo, A. (2014). UNDERSTANDING, SELECTING, AND INTEGRATING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN DISSERTATION RESEARCH: CREATING THE BLUEPRINT FOR YOUR "HOUSE." Retrieved from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1058505.pdf								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Goldhaber, D., Kane, T. J., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2022). *The consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic* (No. w30010). National Bureau of Economic Research.	X	X						
Goodrich J., Hebert M., and Namkung J. (2022). Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on elementary school teachers' practices and perceptions across the Spring and Fall 2020 semesters. *Front. Educ.* 6:793285. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2021.793285	X	X						
Gross, B., Opalka A. (2020). Too many schools leave learning to chance during the pandemic. *Center on Reinventing Public Education*.	X	X						
Hale, J., Dulek, R., Hale, D. (2005). Crisis response communication challenges: Building theory from qualitative data. *Journal of Business Communication*, 42(2), 112–134. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943605274751								
Hills, F. (2020). The pandemic is a crisis for students with special needs.	X	X	X					X
Hill et. al., 2020. Suicide Ideation and Attempts in a Pediatric Emergency Department Before and During COVID-19, PEDIATRICS, at 3 (2020), https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2020/12/15/peds.2020- 029280.full.pdf.								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Holshue, M. L., DeBolt, C., Lindquist, S., Lofy, K. H., Wiesman, J., Bruce, H., Spitters, C., Ericson, K., Wilkerson, S., Tural, A., Diaz, G., Cohn, A., Fox, L., Patel, A., Gerber, S. I., Kim, L., Tong, S., Lu, X., Lindstrom, S., Pillai, S. K. (2020). First case of 2019 novel coronavirus in the United States. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(10), 929.	X							
Hanover Research. (2019). Best practices for trauma-informed instruction. Research Priority Brief.								
Holdsworth, C. (2014). Top 10 management models for your business #7: Situational crisis communication theory, Timothy Coombs (1995).								
Hosseinzadeh P, Zareipour M, Baljani E, Moradali MR. (2022). Social Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic. A Systematic Review. Invest Educ Enferm. doi: 10.17533/udea.iee.v40n1e10. PMID: 35485623; PMCID: PMC9052715.	X							
Huck, C., & Zhang, J. (2021). Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on k-12 education: A systematic literature review. *New Waves-Educational Research and Development Journal*, 24(1), 53-84.	X	X	X					
Huston, Therese A., & DiPietro, Michele. (2007). In the eye of the storm: Students perceptions of helpful faculty actions following a collective tragedy. In D. R. Robertson & L. B. Nilson (Eds.) To Improve the Academy: Vol 25.								

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Ingram, L., Hussey, J., Tigani, M., Hemmelgarn, M. (2006). Writing A Literature Review and Using a Synthesis Matrix. Writing & Speaking Tutorial Services. Retrieved from: https://case.fiu.edu/writingcenter/online-resources/_assets/synthesis-matrix-2.pdf								
Keeley T, Al-Janabi H, Lorgelly P, Coast J. (2013). A qualitative assessment of the content validity of the ICECAP-A and EQ-5D-5L and their appropriateness for use in health research. PLoS One. 2013 Dec 19;8(12):e85287. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0085287. PMID: 24367708; PMCID: PMC3868594								
Khan, A. M., Jameel, H. T., & Nabeel, T. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic: Difficulties faced by special education teachers during emergency remote teaching through online learning and their opinions. Journal of Arts & Social Sciences, 8(2), 78–84.	X	X	X					X
Klein, A., Smith, E. (2021). Explaining the economic impact of Covid-10: Core industries and the Hispanic workforce. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/explaining-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-core-industries-and-the-hispanic-workforce/	X							

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Koch, B. J. (2019). Teacher efficacy and achievement of students with disabilities: A mixed-methods study (Order No. 27544438). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2309840321). Retrieved from http://UMassGlobal.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/teacher-efficacy-achievement-students-with/docview/2309840321/se-2								
Larsen, I. (2020). Hjemmeskole under korona: Lærerne brukte mer tid på å forberede undervisningen. www.oslomet.no/forskning/forskningsnyheter/lererne-brukte-mer-tid-paa-forberede-undervisningen								
Leung L. (2015). Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. J Family Med Prim Care. 2015 Jul-Sep;4(3):324-7. doi: 10.4103/2249-4863.161306. PMID: 26288766; PMCID: PMC4535087.								
Lin, X., & Lehman, J. D. (1999). Supporting learning of variable control in a computer-based biology environment: effects of prompting college students to reflect on their own thinking. Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 36(7), 837–858.								
Lopez-Garrido, G. (2023). Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory Of Motivation In Psychology. Retrieved from: https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html								
Mahoney, J. (2020). Remote learning for primary students poses unique challenges. Globe & Mail (Toronto, Canada), A8.								
Mariani, M., Bayani, J., & Farmanar Kneidel, L. (2022). Addressing the social/emotional needs of students during the pandemic.	X		X					

Title:

	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
McDonald, J. (2022). Teaching and Learning at 31 Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from: https://seis.ucla.edu/news/the-different-perspectives-of-teachers-and-students								
McGrew, K. (N.D.). Walberg's Theory of Educational Productivity. Retrieved from: http://www.iapsych.com/acmcewok/Walberg%27stheoryofeducationalproductivity.html								
McLeod, S. (2016). Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Simply Psychology. Retrieved from: https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html								
Mcleod, S. (2023). Bandura's Bobo Doll Experiment On Social Learning. Retrieved from: https://www.simplypsychology.org/bobo-doll.html								
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	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
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	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
Sun, J., Singletary, B., Jiang, H., Justice, L., Lin, T., & Purtell, K. (2022). Child behavior problems during COVID-19: Associations with parent distress and child social-emotional skills. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 78, 101375. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101375	X		X					
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U.S. Department of Education. (2022)	X	X	X					X

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	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Special Ed
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APPENDIX I

Introduction Email

9/30/23

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student at University Massachusetts Global, conducting a study exploring K12 educators' perceptions of the impact on special education students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic in regard to their self-efficacy as indicated by behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections. Your name was given to me by _____ at _____. I would very much appreciate including your perceptions of the impact on students returning to school post-pandemic. If you volunteer to participate, I would want to schedule a one hour interview at your place of work or via zoom in October or November. All interview responses are confidential, and the interview questions will be available to you before we meet. Please let me know if you would be willing to help contribute to this important study.

Regards,

Andrea Xenios

APPENDIX J

IRB Approval to Conduct Research