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

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

A Dissertation by

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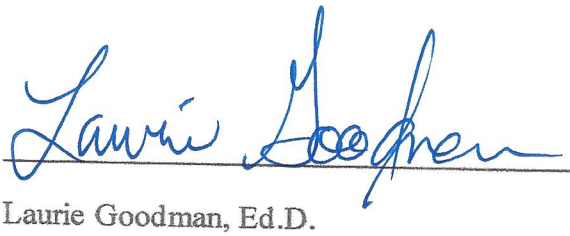

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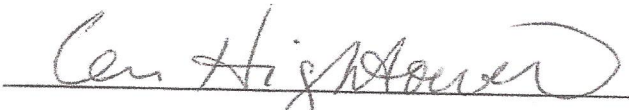

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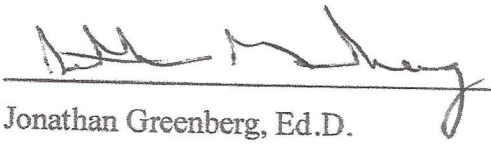

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ABSTRACT

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

by Sarah Orendorff

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income students 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 12 K6 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: After analyzing data, codes, and themes the researcher concluded with 8 major findings related to low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The findings indicated teachers modified instruction in response to students as they exhibited decreased motivation, a lack of independent learning, decreased confidence, decreased persistence, and a fixed mindset impacting their self-efficacy. Furthermore, the participants strongly indicated that a student's home environment made an impact as they returned to the classroom and their risk-taking behavior decreased along with an increase in helpless behavior.

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 student's self-efficacy is affected it can negatively impact their mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement.

Recommendations: The researcher recommends that a strategic plan be developed stakeholders to address the changes in student confidence, all staff at the district or school site do a book study or professional development to address decreased motivation as well as increasing behavior and risk-taking, form professional learning communities (PLCs) for performance data and next instructional steps, and incorporate and promote a growth mindset schoolwide. These strategies should continue to help and support low-income students and enhance their self-efficacy skills since returning to campus.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2020, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection, or COVID-19, was documented in the United States (Holshue et al., 2020). By the end of the year 2020, the number of infections jumped to over 20 million, with 378,000 deaths. As of January 2023, the number of infections reached 1,099,866 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023b). Although the number of cases and deaths is on the decline, the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of life extending beyond healthcare and organization closures.

Education is one area that has been significantly affected by the COVID-19. In March 2020, teachers and students abruptly transitioned to online learning with minimal preparation due to the pandemic. Research has shown that many teachers struggled during this transition, especially due to lack of preparation (Huck & Zhang, 2021). According to Hamilton et al. (2020), many teachers working in low-income communities and communities of color reported the most challenges with struggling to motivate and engage students. Furthermore, although researchers at the RAND Corporation found that 40% of principals found that teachers cited technology and/or internet as a barrier, 90% noted that this barrier was more apparent in those of low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Gross & Opalka, 2020).

Low SES students lacked access to technology and resources compared to students from higher SES homes (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). These resources included computers and WiFi access. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), low SES and minority households are less likely to have traditional computers or access to broadband internet. Along with these challenges, parents were not

prepared for or capable of adequately supporting their students while working from home or having to work in essential industry occupations. This was especially true for special education, English language learners, and low SES households. This is known in the education community as *access*. Services were not adequately provided during this time of crisis, negatively affecting access (An et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Schools with populations where 40% of students come from low-income families are known as Title I schools. These schools receive special funding to increase achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The early research on this topic strongly indicates that the achievement gap has widened during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among vulnerable populations and including in Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Background

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the disease COVID-19, caused by SARS-CoV-2, a pandemic (Katella, 2021). By the end of 2020, the number of infections jumped to over 20 million, with 378,000 deaths. As of January 2023, the pandemic had caused 1,099,866 deaths (CDC, 2023b). Although the number of cases and deaths is on the decline, the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of life going beyond a global health crisis.

The pandemic was a health crisis that permanently changed the health industry. With the increase of packed hospitals filled with the infected, healthcare workers such as nurses and doctors were hailed as heroes for their essential duties (University of Alabama [UAB], 2022). These heroes also faced burnout. Because the virus was so contagious and

more and more people opted to stay home, patients began accessing health services, including mental health services, virtually. Along with the new norm of telehealth, pharmaceutical companies raced for a vaccine and developed vaccines rather quickly (UAB, 2022). The health industry changed dramatically. Furthermore, disruptions and changes went beyond the health crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected other aspects of society. When COVID-19 was still an epidemic in March 2020, aggressive measures such as sweeping lockdowns were put in place, with many remaining in place until the end of August 2020 (Yakusheva et al., 2022). Although these lockdowns occurred to save lives, businesses, and ultimately employees of these businesses, suffered. Normal operations, including education, had changed profoundly.

Pandemic Impacts on Education

The COVID-19 lockdowns of March 2020 brought abrupt school closures, a shift to remote learning, and subsequently inequitable access to education. Students were thrown into this new learning environment (Huck & Zhang, 2021). According to the RAND Corporation, 90% of principals cited technology (such as computers and internet) as a barrier for students during this time, and in particular also noted that students of low SES backgrounds were more affected (Gross & Opalka, 2020). Moreover, according to the Pew Research Center (2021), low SES and minority households were less likely to have traditional computers or access to broadband internet.

Although districts rushed to ensure students were issued appropriate devices for learning, with some passing out internet "hotspots," vulnerable student populations suffered during this time. Parents were not prepared for or capable of adequately

supporting their students while working from home or having to work in essential industry occupations. Special education, English language learners, and low SES households were especially affected. Educational services were not adequately provided during this time of crises and thus access was compromised (An et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

Teaching During the Pandemic

Many teachers struggled during this transition (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Many educators had varying levels of experience with online learning platforms with some having to create their own online instructional approaches (An et al, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Additionally, when students did have computer access, elementary teachers were responsible for ensuring students were not only logged in, but also actively engaged (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Student engagement has been found to have a connection to social emotional learning, and low-income students in particular were not logging in to the distance learning environment. In fact, data suggests that only 60% of low-income students regularly log into online instruction compared to 90% of high-income students (Dorn et al., 2020).

Along with adjusting to this new learning environment with varying degrees of engagement, teachers were expected to teach students characterized as belonging to special populations. According to the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020),

> Special populations refer to students that must overcome barriers that may require consideration and attention to ensure equal opportunity for success and in an

> educational setting. These students must be provided support that will ensure they have equal access to education resources and opportunities. (p. 1)

These students may qualify for special education services, be economically disadvantaged, or have limited English proficiency. Ill-equipped for these changes and expectations, teachers experienced burnout as they struggled to adapt (Fensterwald, 2022; Willemsen & Cohen, 2022; Zamarro et al., 2021). Consequently, coming out of the pandemic many teachers resigned or retired in record numbers as the result of stress and burnout. Although there is no official data on the teachers leaving the profession due to the pandemic, a survey conducted by the National Education Association showed that 55% of 3,621 non-retired members say they are more likely to leave or retire from education sooner than planned because of the pandemic (GBAO, 2022). This number is almost double the number from members who said the same in July 2020. Furthermore, many of these teachers have witnessed student learning loss resulting from remote learning, especially within vulnerable student populations, such as in Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Effects of Remote Learning on Academic Achievement

The achievement gap was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (California Department of Education, n.d.), third graders, specifically examined due to third grade being a milestone year, saw English language arts scores drop by five percent among English language learners. During those same years, non-English language learner students dropped by seven percent. Furthermore, more minority students spent more time participating in remote learning.

According to Parolin and Lee's (2021) *Return to Learn* tracker, districts with more Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be fully remote than hybrid or fully in-person compared to districts with more White students. White students received more in-person instruction than students attending majority Hispanic and majority Black districts as well as in low-income areas (Pew Research Center, 2020). Furthermore, Goldhaber et al.'s (2022) study revealed that remote instruction was a primary predictor of lower math and reading scores.

Effects of Remote Learning on Mental Health and Behavior

School closures have effects on students' social and emotional well-being, affecting engagement in remote online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social-emotional learning has been a growing concern for educators as students have begun to return to school following the pandemic (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Student engagement has been found to have a connection to social emotional learning and low-income students were not logging in to the distance learning environment (Dorn et al., 2020). This influenced their social emotional learning. Researchers worldwide have already observed problems not only with behavior, but also with peers as children are coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sun et al., 2022). Researchers believe trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have effects for years (Dorn et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Remote Learning effects on Low Income Students

Schools with populations where 40% of students come from low-income families are known as Title I schools as they receive special funding. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), these funds are to help close the achievement gap

and are part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESSA), which provides special assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs). The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent move to remote learning exacerbated the issue of equity and access in education, particularly in Title I schools. The early research on this topic strongly indicates the achievement gap has widened with student learning loss, particularly among vulnerable populations and including in Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Theoretical Foundations

Four theoretical foundations support this research: situational crisis communication theory, social disruption theory, educational productivity theory, and social learning theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), situational crisis communication theory examines how variables, assumptions, and relationships should be considered when developing crisis response strategies to protect an organization's reputation. This theory is based on the premise of matching the crisis response to the level of responsibility attributed to the crisis. Furthermore, the theory also includes a predicted correlation between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation occurring across a range of crisis types.

Social Disruption Theory

Social disruption can occur for a variety of reasons. It can be man-made or natural and encompass illnesses, diseases, and injuries (Arnold, 2012). However, society must come together for the greater good and intervene. Colonel Damon Arnold (2012)

provides an example about how obesity is prevalent in inner-city environments. These areas lack healthy food and have an increase in unhealthy food options compared to more affluent areas. Arnold proposes that society as a whole come together to address these social disruptions.

Educational Productivity Theory

Herbert Walberg's (1984) educational productivity theory focuses on not only students' psychological characteristics, but also the psychological environment. He theorized that these two psychological components influence education, highlighting nine factors that fall within three groups: characteristics of students, instruction, and psychological environment. These individual identified factors are necessary components of learning.

Social Learning Theory

Learning theorist Albert Bandura (1962) introduced the concept of social models as a means to accelerate the learning process. Bandura's experiments showed that children learn through observing social models, such as watching an adult and imitating the adult's behavior in the environment. Furthermore, Bandura also noted that children utilize observational learning, highlighting how they think before they imitate. Bandura identified the environment as an important influence on student learning. He later changed the name of his social learning theory to social cognitive theory because he later stressed that learning comes from social experiences. Based on social cognitive theory, crises as social experiences affect student learning.

Theoretical Framework

The research in this study 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 believed that a person's self-efficacy acts as a foundation for not only motivation, but also success. He theorized that it also aids in controlling their actions (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). According to Lopez-Garrido (2023), individuals with high self-efficacy reap many benefits and exhibit characteristics such as increased resiliency, academic achievement, and work performance, as well as healthy habits.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory formed a foundation for this research. He theorized that the capacity to complete a goal or task is derived from an individual's belief in their ability. This researcher utilized the self-efficacy framework in creating the purpose of the study, which in turn also helped guide the interview questions. The framework was believed to be the most applicable when examining K-6 teachers' perceptions on low-income students returning to school with regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections. Utilizing Bandura's framework also 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 through teacher perceptions.

Albert Bandura (1997) theorized that people believe in their ability to control their personal functioning as well as events that may affect their lives. Bandura also noted that this personal agency constitutes the key factor of human agency. People will not take action if they do not believe they have the power to produce results. Their mindset and

behavior influence their daily lives. Nevertheless, people do not have direct control over conditions that affect their lives. Therefore, Bandura hypothesized that people must exercise proxy agency, which necessitates making social connections with others who have obtained resources, knowledge, or other means by which to secure the desired outcomes. In addition, Bandura also highlighted collective school efficacy, an interactive social and organizational structure in which environmental conditions affect academic achievement among students and in turn have the ability to impair the school environment.

Gap in the Research

The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic response on student achievement and behavior are still unknown. In order to address these important issues, educators hold the key to this story as it unfolds. How can educators around the world support students whose education was disrupted by the pandemic?

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many parts of everyday life and became more than a global health crisis. Lockdowns occurred and education changed when students were abruptly moved from an in-person to remote learning environment. Teachers struggled during this transition and had difficulty supporting and engaging their students, many of whom lacked access to technology and the internet. Students from special populations were particularly affected, as evidenced by decreases in math and reading scores examined in 2019 and 2022. Additionally, educators have noted an increase in problems in student behavior as well as problems with peers (Dorn et al., 2020; Huck &

Zhang, 2021). A variety of foundational theories and framework were reviewed to develop the underpinnings of the current study.

Statement of the Research Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic response in education profoundly altered student academic and behavioral outcomes. Students were required to abruptly move from in-person learning to remote learning; research is now showing a widened achievement gap and an increase in social emotional problems among students (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Teachers played a key role in this rapid shift in education and were firsthand witnesses of the effects of this shift, not only during, but now coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many teachers and students struggled during this transition, especially with the lack of preparation in transitioning to remote learning (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, low SES students lacked access to technology and resources compared to students from higher SES homes (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). Once students were finally online, teachers working in low-income communities and communities of color reported the most challenges in motivating and engaging students in an online environment (Hamilton et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2020). Additionally, parents were not prepared for or capable of adequately supporting their students while working from home or having to work in essential industry occupations. This was especially true for special education, English language learner, and low SES students (Starr et al., 2023). Services were not adequately provided during this time of crises and the effects are now being seen (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Student behavior and mental health is another area that was affected during this time. Teachers noticed behavioral changes in students coming out of the pandemic. Researchers worldwide have already observed not only problems with behavior, but also problems with peers (Sun et al., 2022). Other organizations have taken note as well, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, who declared a National State of Emergency in mental health. Suzanne Goldberg, Assistant Secretary in the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, also noted the urgency to address these issues of trauma coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, adding how it places students at risk for self-harm and suicide (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Researchers believe trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have effects for years (Dorn et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Students considered English language learners, minority populations, low SES students, and those receiving special education services have not always received equitable and accessible education; the COVID-19 pandemic response has exacerbated this issue (An et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). In particular, this discrepancy has affected students at Title I schools, which receive special funding to increase achievement (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). According to Shores and Steinberg (2022), federal funding that was allocated for addressing learning loss from remote learning was not distributed properly to Title I schools, with many not receiving as much as other schools. Children have suffered academically, socially, and emotionally, and the effects were evident in classrooms.

According to the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (n.d.), students' mental health, physical health, social emotional development, cognitive development, and identity development are critical to learning and development. The field of education's COVID-19 pandemic response did not adequately meet students' needs. Teachers witnessed firsthand the academic and social emotional impacts on children while struggling to engage students in online learning. Further, they have also dealt with the aftereffects of the pandemic on students, including learning loss, behavioral changes, stress, and other mental health problems (McDonald, 2022). Although teachers experienced the impact of the pandemic on children, there has been little research to understand how teachers perceive the pandemic affected their students' education. Further, gaining perspectives from teachers from lower income schools following the pandemic can provide a deeper understanding of how the pandemic affected disadvantaged students' mental health and learning. It is clear the pandemic negatively affected student learning and disproportionately affected students in disadvantaged communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Teachers' perspectives are valuable in understanding how the pandemic affected vulnerable children and can provide insights that can be used to help them recover what was lost and to help them prosper and plan in the future.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income elementary 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 elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?
3. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Significance of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of life beyond healthcare. Responses to what began as an epidemic included aggressive measures, such as sweeping lockdowns put in place, with many remaining until the end of August 2020 (Yakusheva et al., 2022). Although these lockdowns occurred to save lives, businesses and ultimately the employees of these businesses, suffered. Normal operations, including education, had changed. There are already inequities in education among students in the United States and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue; however, the long-term effects are still unknown (Cruz, 2021; Parolin & Lee, 2021). Teachers have been on the frontlines not only since the beginning of the pandemic, but also coming out of it.

Students from special populations have not always had equitable educational opportunities (An et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). These populations include English language learners, minority populations, and students from low SES backgrounds. Data show that foreign-born Hispanic students are four times more likely to drop out of school than U.S.-born Hispanic students (Sheng et al., 2011). Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2021) has shown that Black and Hispanic households are less likely to have traditional computers or access to broadband internet. This is known as the digital divide. Furthermore, evidence from all major studies overwhelmingly supports the relationship between SES and academic achievement (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995).

Data is showing learning loss in all populations following the pandemic, but has been especially prevalent among students attending Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Title I schools have populations where 40% of students or more come from low-income families. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), these schools receive special funding to help close the achievement gap and are part of the ESSA that provide special assistance to LEAs. The body of literature on this topic strongly indicates that the achievement gap has widened due to student learning loss, particularly among vulnerable populations and in Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

The data are also showing a need for mental health services among students coming out of the pandemic. Researchers worldwide have already observed not only problems with behavior, but also problems with peers (Sun et al., 2022). Of even more concern, research has shown that districts with more Black and Hispanic minorities were

more likely to be fully remote than hybrid or fully in-person compared to districts with more White students (Parolin & Lee, 2021). This is concerning not only academically, as the time spent remotely versus in-person does have a correlation with lower reading and math scores, but also that these students experienced more trauma than students that received more in-person instruction (Goldhaber et al., 2022). Researchers believe trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will have effects for years (Dorn et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

The perceptions of teachers on the effects of students coming out of the pandemic are key to this study. Teachers were expected to teach students characterized as belonging to special populations despite the new learning environment. Ill-equipped for these changes and expectations, teachers experienced burnout as they struggled to adapt (Fensterwald, 2022; Willemsen & Cohen, 2022; Zamarro et al., 2021). Consequently, many teachers coming out of the pandemic resigned or retired in record numbers as the result of stress and burnout. Furthermore, many of these teachers have seen student learning loss along with mental health issues resulting from remote learning, especially within vulnerable student populations, such as those in Title I schools (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Teachers' voices related to students' welfare have not been adequately heard coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic response on student achievement and behavior are still unknown (An et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). In order to address these important issues, educators' knowledge and perceptions need to be heard. If we can learn from educators, the information can help direct future school district responses to crises.

In summary, this study is necessary to understand the experiences of educators as they deal with the academic and mental health issues students are experiencing coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding these experiences will help educational and mental health leaders plan for crises, including addressing the present inequities among students. At the local level, districts may utilize these results to ensure programs are in place to address learning loss as well as ensure mental health services are available with principals and educators ready to implement these programs. Parents and caregivers may also benefit from this study as they are made aware of the programs and services in place and can partner with their schools to ensure students receive the resources they need. Lastly, the results of this study may be utilized by federal and state policymakers as they move forward in developing new legislation, regulations, or policies to ensure districts are providing necessary resources to remediate learning loss and provide mental health services.

Definitions

For purposes of clarity and understanding the following definitions are provided for this study.

- *Academic Achievement:* From content standards, the academic knowledge, behaviors, and skills students are expected to learn and demonstrate in a performance task (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020).
- *Behavior:* A way of learning that allows people to learn from the experience of what others are doing and evaluate their own behavior; within the classroom, students are academically engaged, respectful, and/or disruptive and learn those beliefs 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, 2023a). The term is also often used to refer to the global pandemic.
- *Fixed Mindset:* Belief that one's competence and talent are traits and do not change (Transforming Education, 2020).
- *Gradual Release Model:* This model is centered around the idea a teacher will model a skill or strategy for a few minutes, briefly allow for student practice, then release students to begin practicing on their own (Mosby & Hamilton, 2022).
- *Growth Mindset:* Belief that ability can change as a result of effort, perseverance, and practice (Transforming Education, 2020).
- *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 their belief in their own ability to succeed (Bandura, 1977).
- *Pandemic:* A worldwide outbreak and the spread of a new disease affecting many people (CDC, 2023b).
- *Self-Efficacy:* A person's belief in his/her 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 proposed study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This study was delimited to 12 K-6 teachers who taught low-income students for at least 2 years 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 low-income students during remote learning were addressed. Additionally, Chapter I presented the problem statement, purpose, research questions, definitions, and delimitations to the study. Chapter II expands 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 low-income students 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 presents an analysis of the data collected and provides a discussion of the findings. Lastly, Chapter V summarizes the study's findings, offering conclusions and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter discusses the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent disruption in education, remote learning, effects of remote learning on academic achievement, and 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 elementary educators' perceptions of students returning to school post-pandemic.

Review of the Literature

COVID-19

The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was documented in January 2020 (Holshue et al., 2020). By the end of that year, the number of infections rose to 20 million with 378,000 deaths. As of July 2023, the number of deaths reached 1,134,710 (CDC, 2023b). The emergence of COVID-19 in the United States changed many aspects of daily life, affecting health care delivery, causing business closures, and creating other disruptions of normal operations.

Health care was greatly affected during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE, 2022) indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic put incredible stress on the U.S. health care workforce. Leading up to the pandemic, the health care industry was already experiencing shortages; this issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when hospitals were overwhelmed trying to treat patients. The ASPE report also indicates that healthcare workers have experienced burnout and exhaustion along with trauma, stress, and mental health problems.

Along with the stresses on the health care industry, businesses suffered during this time as well. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended closing schools, businesses, and gathering places to mitigate the spread of the virus. These closures had significant social and economic impacts. Facing the risk of incurring penalties, citations, fines, and losses of licenses, local and state bureaucratic processes adhered to the CDC guidelines. However, these guidelines created to mitigate the pandemic had adverse effects. More than half of U.S. states closed all nonessential businesses to prevent the spread of disease (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). Many lost their jobs as businesses suffered. Along with businesses, education also faced disruption due to closures.

Disruption in Education

In March 2020, minimally prepared teachers and students transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning during the pandemic differed from typical online learning structures; instead, this remote learning was a form of emergency e-learning (Fisher et al., 2021). In some cases, this emergency e-learning offered a way for teachers to be innovative. However, there were also downsides to the rush to move online in spring of 2020.

Schoolwork structures and evaluative processes changed profoundly during this time. School districts varied regarding how much asynchronous and synchronous contact students received (An et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2021). Many school districts opted for fewer class sessions (Fisher et al., 2021). For most schools, assessment did not occur at all (An et al., 2021). The change in these structures had effects on all students, but particularly affected low-income students.

Low-income students were particularly affected during this disruption in education. Lacking access to in-school resources, many of these students did not have the adequate technology to learn online. Digital knowledge also varied for teachers during this transition, which affected the ability of all students, particularly marginalized students, to receive an adequate education (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Fisher et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

This disruption in education also affected students' mental health. During the pandemic, many students suffered mental health challenges and lost access to school-based services and supports (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). According to Hosseinzadeh et al. (2022), during this time students were more likely to develop stress, maladaptation (failure to adjust adequately or appropriately to the environment or situation), and PTSD.

Student engagement has been found to have a connection to social emotional learning (Dorn et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, student engagement among lower income students was lower than higher income students. Additionally, Hawrilenko et al.'s (2020) study indicated that lower-income children may experience greater impairment to their mental health in comparison to their higher income counterparts.

Teaching During the Pandemic

Online teaching is different from in-person teaching; it requires a different set of skills despite being similar in nature. There are numerous models, principles, frameworks, and standards for quality online teaching. Barbour (2007) proposed seven principles of effective online course design for adolescent learners: development

preparation, simple navigation, but diverse content presentation, summary and personalization, clear instructions and expectations, the use of text and visuals, smart use of multimedia and interactive elements, and targeting relevant audience. However, the research on the abrupt transition to online learning has shown that many teachers struggled during this transition and had varying levels of preparedness (Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Although many teachers felt they had some knowledge and skills for online teaching, many still did not feel well-equipped to transition to an online format (An et al., 2021, Huck & Zhang, 2021). An et al. (2021) surveyed 110 teachers from 13 different states and found that 80% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had knowledge or skills for online teaching. Additionally, 73% felt comfortable teaching online, with 70% showing confidence in doing so. However, 66% of the participants wanted to learn more about online teaching, with 51% saying it was challenging.

Teachers used different online approaches and strategies during this time. A study by An et al. (2021) showed that most instructional strategies included video lectures, reading materials, online discussions, learning by making, project-based learning, offline assignments such as printable activities, hands-on activities, game-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and simulations. When assessing learning, online quizzes and exams were more prevalent, followed by projects, discussions, and presentations. However, many teachers reported that they did not assess students at all during this time.

Teachers used a variety of tools during this time, including online teaching platforms and technology tools. Most participants in An et al.'s (2021) study noted that they utilized Google Classroom. Zoom was another frequent tool used during this time,

with 67.3% of teachers surveyed stating that they met their students synchronously and 32.7% noting that their classes were asynchronous. More than half reported only meeting students synchronously 1-2 times a week, with 9% meeting 3-4 times a week and 9% meeting daily. Only 2.6% reported having meetings longer than 1 hour, with the majority (56.6%) reporting meetings that were 30-60 minutes long (An et al., 2021).

Teachers reported experiencing myriad challenges during this transition period. Many participants in An et al.'s (2021) study reported a lack of student participation or engagement (or lack of parental support). Additionally, many students lacked the technology necessary to participate. There were other concerns as well, such as students' well-being, the lack of face-to-face interaction, poor work-life balance, and learning new technology. These challenges gave many teachers the perspective to provide suggestions to prepare for the future need to pivot quickly to remote learning.

Teachers felt that professional development and more technology feel would help prepare them for another event like the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, professional development for teachers should focus on online and blended learning. Additionally, administrators should ensure that the school has up-to-date technology not only for students, but also for the teachers, so they are able to teach and learn effectively. Also, students and teachers need the training necessary to utilize technology. Lastly, teachers believe schools and districts should have action plans in place in case of emergencies. This will ensure a smoother transition online, regardless of the event (An et al., 2021).

Effects of Remote Learning on Academic Achievement

Although the spring 2020 emergency transition to remote learning served as an opportunity for teachers to explore the use of technology for teaching and learning, the

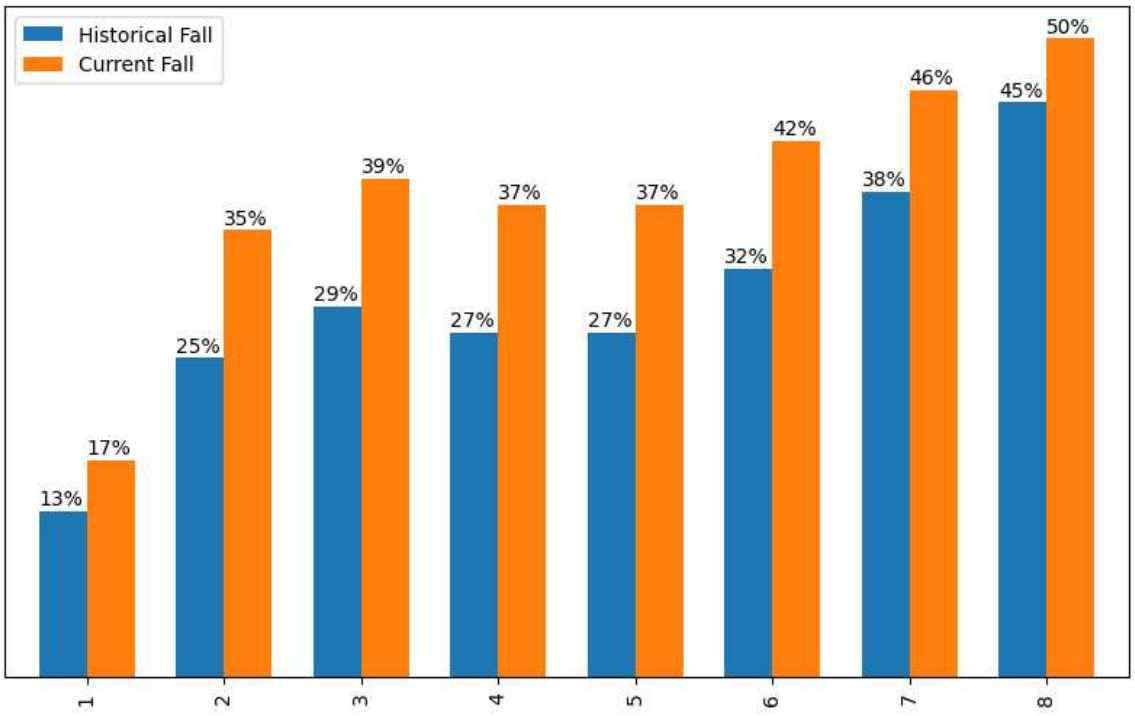
body of literature on this topic strongly indicates academic achievement has been affected (An et al., 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Reading and math are two areas in which achievement was affected.

Kuhfield et al. (2022) conducted a study on reading achievement of third through eighth graders and noted significant declines in academic performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The average fall 2021 reading test scores were .09 to .17 standard deviations lower compared to 2019 among same-grade peers. The data suggested a need for targeted supports to strengthen foundational reading skills, particularly among students of color in high poverty areas. Other early research shows similar results.

Math scores were affected more than reading scores were affected among elementary-aged students. Over 3 million students in first through eighth grades took an i-Ready Diagnostic in math; compared to the historical average, they showed a decrease in scores when starting the 2021-22 school year. The downward trend of math scores was evident in state test scores as well. Forty percent of students in Texas were not considered proficient in 2021, and in the state of Indiana math scores decreased from 48% of students being proficient in math in 2019 down to 37% proficient in 2021 (Sattem et al., 2022). More elementary and middle school students began the 2021-2022 school year not ready for grade-level work, as evidenced in Figure 1. Goldhaber et al.'s (2022) study also revealed that increased remote instruction was a primary predictor of lower math and reading scores.

Figure 1

Grade 1-8 Students Two or More Grades Below Math Grade Level



Note. Adapted from *Understanding Student Learning: Insights From Fall 2021,* by Curriculum Associates, 2021 (https://www.curriculumassociates.com/-/media/mainsite/files/iready/iready-understanding-student-learning-paper-fallresults-2021.pdf). Copyright 2021 by the author.

Effects of Remote Learning on Mental Health and Behavior

In-person schooling was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic and had adverse effects on mental health and behavior. To slow the spread of the virus, shelter-in-place orders were issued across the United State, causing social isolation among students now required to stay home instead of attend school. Social isolation has been linked to child and adolescent mental health problems (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Students had limited access to assistance to address these problems. There is evidence that 35% of students who require mental health assistance receive care through their school (Ali et al.,

2019). During the pandemic, these mental health issues went largely unaddressed, leading to adverse effects coming out of the pandemic.

The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020) reported that during the pandemic most students in the U.S. experienced mental health challenges that affected their overall wellbeing. The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education also indicated that during this time period there was an increase in sexual harassment, violence, and online harassment for K-12 and post-secondary girls along with students who were transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Asian American and Pacific Islander students saw an increase in identity-based harassment and violence that affected their access to educational opportunities.

It is important to note that some students thrived during remote learning, reporting that they got more sleep and appreciated being able to get snacks whenever they needed (Brundin, 2021). Consequently, despite these positive aspects of remote learning, Brundin (2021) also found that when students returned fully to school in 2022, their social competence has decreased, and students are needing extra supports in the areas of mental health and behavior.

Remote Learning Effects on Low-Income Students

According to the Pew Research Center (2020), during the pandemic, online instruction was more prevalent in higher SES areas. Furthermore, many teachers noticed homework gaps among marginalized students and had difficulty contacting them (Huck & Zhang, 2020). In fact, Huck and Zhang (2020) noted that 55% of teachers surveyed believed communication issues were a challenge due to COVID lockdowns. Current research shows that the digital divide (i.e., a lack of technological resources) among

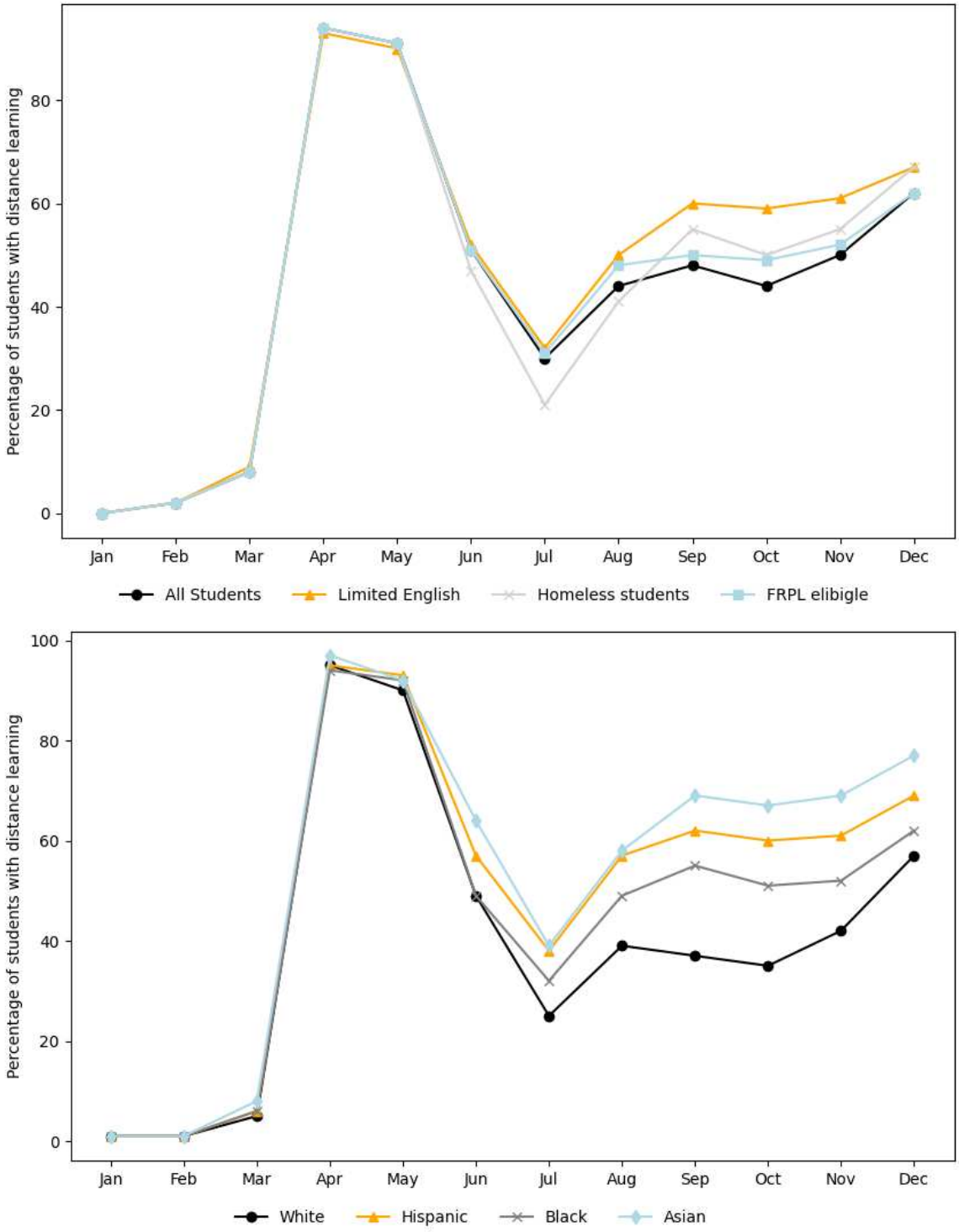
minorities, students from rural areas, and students from low SES backgrounds contributed to the growing achievement gap.

Findings from research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far show that learning loss reinforces persistent achievement disparities and gaps (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021). There are reasons for this learning loss among these groups. Statistical models have projected that the greatest learning loss will be greatest among low-income students, minorities, and those from other vulnerable populations (Huck & Zhang, 2021). A study completed by Dorn et al. (2020) based on i-Ready learning software has indicated that 60% of low-income students were logging in regularly compared to 90% of higher-income students.

Low-income Black, and Hispanic populations were more likely to receive fully remote instruction compared to their White and higher income counterparts (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Hawrilenko et al., 2021). There is evidence linking remote learning and the widening of the achievement gap. Among school districts that were remote for most of 2020-2021, high poverty schools showed 50% more learning loss than low poverty schools (Goldhaber et al., 2022). Mental health and behavioral issues among low-income students have also increased. Figure 2 illustrates the disparity not only among low-income students, but other vulnerable students as well.

Figure 2

Percentage of Students with Distance Learning



Note. Adapted from *The Consequences of Remote and Hybrid Instruction During the Pandemic,* by D. Goldhaber, T. J. Kane, A. McEachin, E. Morton, T. Patterson, & D. O. Staiger, 2022. National Bureau of Economic Research. Copyright 2022 by the author.

Lower income students' social emotional learning was affected during the pandemic. Student engagement has been found to have a connection to social emotional learning (Dorn et al., 2020). Student engagement among lower income students was lower than higher income students despite spending more time in remote learning (Cruz, 2022; Goldhaber et al., 2022). Furthermore, the findings of Hawrilenko et al.'s study (2021) indicate that lower income children may experience greater impairment to their mental health due to their extended time spent in remote learning during the pandemic.

Theoretical Foundations

Researchers tend to rely on previous theories to help guide and ground their research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). These theories provide a foundation for the researcher and the reader in understanding the purpose of the research. This study drew its foundation from the following theories: situational crisis communication theory, social disruption theory, educational productivity theory, and social learning theory. Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory was used primarily to guide the development of the research study.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, attention has been placed on organizations and sectors, education in particular, regarding crisis response. All organizations encounter crises throughout their life cycle, whether it is the fault of the organization or due to an event such as a natural disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) uses attributions of an organization's

responsibility to determine how crisis managers prescribe crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2016). These strategies first must protect stakeholders from harm, but also protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007).

In crises, there is a need for communication. Crises can produce a lot of stress, particularly for stakeholders (Coombs, 2016). Coombs (2016) noted that most of the information on crises will come from news or media. Stakeholders are particularly interested in what corrective actions are being taken to prevent similar crises from occurring in the future. Stakeholders must assess crisis responsibility, and an organization's reputation is at stake during this time.

Communication affects people's perceptions in a crisis. Coombs (1995) postulated that crisis response strategies have three objectives related to protecting an organization's reputation: shaping attributions of the crisis, changing perceptions of the organization in crisis, and reducing the negative affect generated by the crisis. Primary crisis responses include the crisis manager confronting the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization, asserting that there is no crisis, blaming a person or group outside of the organization for the crisis, minimizing the organization's responsibility, minimizing the perceived damage, offering money or other gifts, and lastly taking full responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness (Coombs, 2016). In contrast, secondary crisis response strategies include bolstering strategies such as telling stakeholders about the past good works of the organization, praising stakeholders, and reminding stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

It is important to note that stakeholders' physical and psychological needs should be of the utmost priority during a crisis. Although many organizations may be concerned

about their reputation, this must be secondary; organizational needs must be addressed first (Coombs, 2016). Addressing the physical and psychological needs of others was indeed the priority in 2020 during the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic; these needs remain important today.

SCCT can be applied to any organizational setting that is or has experienced a crisis. Figure 3 provides a visual example of the crisis situation model developed from SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Figure 3

Crisis Situation Model of SCCT

Note. Adapted from "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *10*, 163-176 (https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049). Copyright 2007 by the author.

Based on empirical evidence to support his theory, Coombs (2007) developed a crisis response strategy guideline for assessing and responding to crises. This guideline

allows crisis managers to make informed, strategic, and beneficial decisions during a crisis (see Table 1).

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," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *10*, 163-176 (https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049). 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 from the crisis. According to Coombs, reputational threat is caused by initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation. Reputational threat refers to the harm a crisis may cause an organization if nothing is done to address it (Weiner,

2006). Through his research, Coombs 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," by W. T. Coombs, 2007, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *10*, 163-176 (https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049). Copyright 2007 by the author.

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

Social Disruption Theory

Social disruption is a term used to describe a dysfunction or breakdown of social life and how people come together during this time of disruption. According to Park and Stokowski (2009), social disruption refers to a change in social life within a community setting. This social disruption can occur whether the crisis is man-made or natural. Social disruption can include illnesses, diseases, injuries, or disasters and affect people of different races, origins, or ethnicities (Arnold, 2012). Communities need to come together during these difficult times and work through social disruptions together.

When a community encounters 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) utilized obesity as an example of obesity, reflecting on how it affects the nation on various levels. The disruption of the obesity crisis affects the U.S. health care system at the national level as well as families on 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, such as obesity, they come together to combat it.

There is a lot to learn from Arnold's (2012) social disruption theory. Arnold's framework for the 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 daily behavioral choices are based on concepts from his underlying framework, the theory of social disruption.

Educational Productivity Theory

Educational productivity theory aims to address a main problem in educational research: namely, how to make learning more effective and productive. Walberg et al. (1982) defined effective learning as students reaching stated goals and defined productive learning as maximizing student performance or goals while utilizing resources such as their own and the teacher's time. The theory itself, however, is based on an economic theory with European origins.

American researchers Cobb and Douglas were the first to carry out extensive tests on educational productivity in 1928. They studied economics and farming to determine how to address learning effectiveness and productivity. Cobb and Douglas noted that adding more farm labor, land, plows, and other resources increases grain yield. While these resources produce results together, only one resource is insufficient. Utilizing a model with substitutes and trade-offs, Cobb and Douglas created an equation that is used as the backbone of educational productivity theory (Walberg et al., 1982). Walberg utilized Cobb and Douglas's equation to continue to build upon educational productivity theory.

Through quantitative research of 80 investigators, Walberg et al. (1982) determined evidence for the impact of seven factors on positive relationships with learning: student age, ability, and motivation; quality and quantity of instruction (as well as self-instruction); and social-psychological morale of the class and home. Regarding educational productivity and using the Cobb-Douglas equation, Walberg hypothesized that increasing any of the seven factors would increase learning, whereas increasing any factor while holding the others fixed would yield diminishing returns. Additionally, he

hypothesized that any factor equal to zero equals zero learning, noting that there are trade-offs and substitutes, and lastly that different factors may increase percentages in learning.

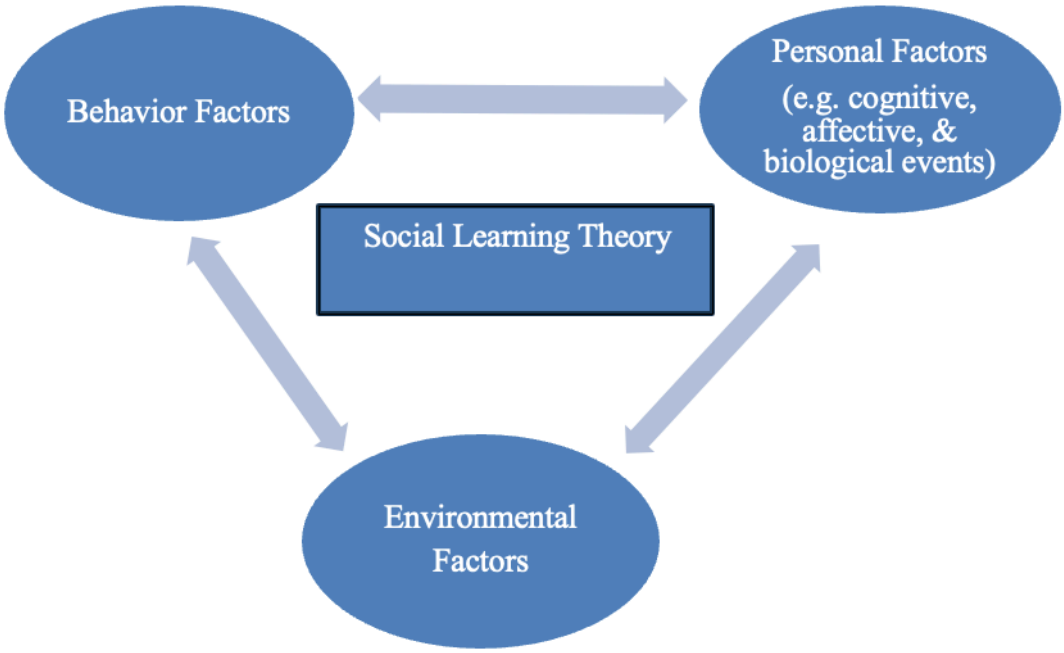
Social Learning Theory/Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura's social learning theory was developed in the 1960s and eventually developed into social cognitive theory in 1986. This theory posits that learning is affected by cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors and differs from traditional psychological theories stating that learning is solely experiential (Bandura, 1981). Furthermore, Bandura (1986) postulated that all learning can occur by observing others' behavior and consequences of that behavior.

Bandura explained social cognitive theory further by noting four key aspects that occur during the process of observational learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Attention occurs when people are selective as they observe and extract information from ongoing models. Retention occurs when a process transforms information into rules and conceptions. Reproduction occurs when the observed behavior is replicated. Lastly, motivation helps the learner with attention, practice, and retention (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Figure 4 demonstrates this relationship, known as triadic reciprocal causation.

Figure 4

Triadic Reciprocal Causation



Note. Adapted from "Social Cognitive Theory of Organizational Management," by R. Wood & A. Bandura, 1989, *The Academy of Management Review*, *14*(3), 361-384 (https://doi.org/10.2307/258173). Copyright 1989 by the authors.

Concepts critical for learning include human agency, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. The concept of human agency posits that learners make an intentional decision to learn as well as enact that behavior change (Bandura, 2001). The primary feature of human agency is its "power to originate actions for given purposes" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Furthermore, Bandura's social cognitive theory also identifies three modes within this human agency: personal, proxy, and collective (Bandura, 1997).

The concept of self-regulation refers to one's thoughts, feelings, and actions in the pursuit of attaining their personal goal (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005). Self-regulation operates through four psychological subfunctions: the self-monitoring subfunction, the judgmental subfunction, and self-reactive influences (Bandura, 1991). Bandura's (1991)

work on social learning theory/social cognitive theory served as building blocks in the concept of self-efficacy because self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the self-regulation process.

Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to be successful in controlling actions or events in their lives. Such beliefs are based on whether the individual feels they possess adequate abilities, motivation, and resources to complete the task or achieve their personal goal (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy emphasized the influence self-efficacy has on not only learning, but also motivation for learning (Artino, 2012). Additionally, Bandura believed a person's self-efficacy can help shape the foundation for "motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment" (Lopez-Garrido, 2023, p. 1). An individual's belief in whether they can or cannot achieve or succeed plays a crucial role in task or goal completion.

"Beliefs of personal efficacy constitute a 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. 1). The belief component is crucial because beliefs are the main factor of human agency (Bandura, 1977). Once these beliefs are formed, however, efficacy beliefs "regulate aspirations, choice of behavioral courses, mobilization and maintenance efforts, and affective reactions" (p. 4). In addition to individuals believing they can complete a task, and possess the skills to do so, they must successfully execute the behavior under all circumstances. This is where skills and efficacy come together. These two components contribute to what Bandura calls "reciprocal causation," meaning one component depends on the functioning of the other (Artino, 2012, p. 77).

Causation is a term used to signify functional dependence between events. In Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, human agency possesses an interdependent causal structure involving triadic reciprocal causation. Furthermore, in this transactional view of self as well as society, Bandura posited, "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). This is illustrated in Figure 4, which demonstrates the relationships among the three major classes of determinants in triadic reciprocal causation. According to Bandura, people with a low sense of personal agency may become apathetic and fail to achieve their desired and valued outcomes.

Bandura's believed that self-efficacy could influence an individual's effort, choice of activities, and persistence (Artino, 2012). Having high self-efficacy is beneficial in that it leads to resilience to adversity and stress, healthy lifestyle habits, improved employee or student performance, and educational achievement (Lopez-Garrido, 2023). There are four primary sources of information necessary to create students' self-efficacy: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious (or observational) experiences, social persuasions, and physiological and psychological states (Bandura, 1997). Figure 5 illustrates this concept. These four sources provide the person with efficacy to determine behavior and performance for a specific task or situation. It is mastery experience, however, that serves as an influential source of efficacy because it provides the individual with the evidence necessary to help the individual gather specific resources or tools required to succeed (Artino, 2012).

Figure 5

Four Sources of Efficacy

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

Although Bandura is considered a seminal theorist, there are critiques of his work on self-efficacy. Eastman and Marziller (1984) examined the conceptual basis of self-efficacy theory. In particular, the researchers studied the distinction between outcome and efficacy expectations in relation to fear and avoidant behavior. Eastman and Marziller concluded that self-efficacy theory is conceptually problematic, particularly that the efficacy expectations are not unambiguously differentiated from outcome expectations, despite Bandura's (1978) claim.

Usher and Pajares (2008), however, found self-efficacy to be linked negatively to "phobias, addiction, depression, social skills, assertiveness, stress in a variety of contexts, smoking behavior, pain control, health, and athletic performance" (p. 1). However, Usher and Pajares pointed out a concern with determining an appropriate measure of efficacy, especially when predicting academic outcomes. A common self-efficacy measurement

utilizes an extensive and comprehensive instrument that measures an individual's sense of efficacy without giving them a specific related task. Usher and Parajes also posited that efficacy is more of a personality trait one possesses rather than a personal judgment of oneself. Furthermore, they noted that academic self-perceptions of competence are not considered a reliable measure (i.e., asking an individual to rate themselves) without a clear activity or task. Usher and Parajes also claimed that individuals will think of a similar task and attempt to evaluate their efficacy regardless of whether the task is aligned with the question/task being asked.

In spite of the criticisms of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, this theory still offers a seminal and common framework that researchers utilize when examining education (Artino, 2012). Previous studies linked self-efficacy beliefs and tasks and how they work together, noting that multiple self-efficacy beliefs contribute to both positive and negative outcomes (Cattelino et al., 2021).

Impact on Learning During Times of Crisis

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, other U.S. crises led to disrupted student learning. Inequity in education became more apparent during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Ninety-eight percent of the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans, ground zero for Hurricane Katrina, was made up of African American residents. Tens of thousands of students missed school for months and even years, increasing the achievement gap and disparity between races, with some students never even returning to school (Mellon, 2010).

The Camp Fire is another example of a crisis in which learning was affected. In the town of Paradise, California, the 2018 Camp Fire caused significant damages to not only structures, but also the education system (Hamideh et al., 2021). Additionally,

Flanagan et al. (2011) noted that residents in Paradise were considered socially vulnerable, meaning there were many low-income residents, including the elderly, children, and individuals who were disabled or in fragile health. More vulnerable populations rely on the education system for not only learning, but also basic needs for their children, such as food and day care.

Along with Katrina and the Camp Fire, the body of literature strongly indicates that the achievement gap has widened during the recent COVID-19 pandemic when many vulnerable student populations did not have equal access to WiFi and technology or the adequate services they needed (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, low-income students have fewer opportunities than students of higher SES for educational attainment (Lam, 2014). Parents in poverty are dealing with economic hardships and thus may not have time or resources to provide the same opportunities as higher SES parents are able to provide. Furthermore, evidence from all major studies overwhelmingly supports the relationship between SES and academic achievement (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Haveman & Wolf, 1995).

These findings have implications in crises in education in that these students from lower SES backgrounds already have fewer opportunities. With the Camp Fire and Katrina, low SES students were affected more deeply. With the digital divide and lack of access to technology and resources, these same students did not have the equity and access compared to students from higher SES homes (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Self-Efficacy in Education

Self-efficacy has an impact in educational settings as it relates to student behavior (Bandura et al., 1996; Mills et al., 2006; Pajares, 1996). Bandura's (1996, 2021) later research provided evidence that self-efficacy is the most powerful factor influencing one's personal achievement. He further noted positive relationships between self-efficacy and goal setting, memory performance, ability, motivation, and cognitive effort (Bandura, 1993). Conversely, Bandura (1993) also noted negative relationships between low self-efficacy and anxiety, depression, and behavior issues.

Other researchers also reported on the impact of self-efficacy as it relates to a student's academic performance. Usher and Pajares (2008) suggested that self-efficacy is a more reliable indicator of a student's academic success than an objective assessment. Caprara et al. (2008) further found a relationship between self-efficacy and academic success, finding a negative predictive relationship between self-efficacy and dropout rates. A more recent study in Italy examined the relationship between emotional and self-regulated self-efficacy. More specifically, the study examined positive coping strategies among 485 Italian students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cattelino et al., 2021). Cattelino et al. (2021) concluded that it would be beneficial for educators to support self-efficacy behavior among their students to promote positive feelings and coping strategies that come from everyday challenges and during times of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers, like students, also exhibit better job performance when they possess high self-efficacy (Shemshack, 2022). Shemshack (2022) conducted a study of teachers returning to school post COVID-19 and indicated a correlation between teachers with

high self-efficacy and a longer duration in the field compared to teachers with low self-efficacy. Moreover, Shemshack posited that self-efficacy in teachers can be increased with professional development training, support, and additional resources.

There is a relationship between teachers with high self-efficacy and positive outcomes for students (Calkins, 2022). Calkins (2022) found that self-efficacy increases the longer a teacher has been in the classroom, so a newer teacher may have lower self-efficacy. Furthermore, Bullock et al. (2015) also posited that newer teachers struggle with self-efficacy due to a lack of experience, including challenging situations that contribute to their own self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy and Low-Income Students

Bandura (1996, 2001) posited that self-efficacy is a high predictor of student achievement. Additionally, Bandura (2002) also suggested that self-efficacy is one of the basic capacities of human nature, and thus it applies to all cultures. Research also shows that when considering SES, achievement, and self-efficacy, SES and self-efficacy all contribute to academic success (Jurecska, 2012).

Caprara et al.'s (2008) study of junior high students in Italy found that SES both influenced grades and the dropout rate, as well as self-efficacy for self-regulated learning. Williams and Williams (2010) studied math achievement test scores and found that all except two of the 30 countries examined showed a positive effect based on student SES. Also, out of the same 30 countries, only 19 showed a positive effect of SES on self-efficacy. These findings imply that culture may have an influence on poverty, self-efficacy, and academic achievement.

SES affects student achievement in many ways. Individuals with low SES tend to lack resources that promote an environment conducive to studying and learning (Davis-Kean, 2005). However, Jurecska's (2012) study of 91 participants from four different school districts (in Nicaragua and the U.S.) showed that those with a medium SES earned higher academic and overall self-efficacy scores than those in the higher SES bracket. In addition, the lower SES group also displayed higher self-efficacy than the higher SES group. Despite these findings, students from the higher SES group had higher GPAs. This finding suggests that SES affects self-efficacy, even after controlling for self-efficacy and culture.

Self-efficacy and SES have also been linked to behavior and mental health among students. Demanet and Houtte (2017) conducted a study on 9174 students across 111 schools in four European cities. Their study concluded that students from a low SES are prone to have behavior issues at school; however, by increasing students' academic self-efficacy, this association can be buffered. Additionally, Meilstrup et al. (2019) conducted a study of Danish children aged 11-15 and found that low SES students are more likely to have daily emotional symptoms and lower levels of self-efficacy compared to high SES students. However, as Demanet and Houtte found in their study, higher self-efficacy acts as a buffer between SES and emotional symptoms.

Low-Income Students Returning to School

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the largest disruptions to learning in recent history. The pandemic led to school closures that affected not only the United States, but also 95% of the world's student population (Betthäuser et al, 2023). Academic achievement and mental health were two areas of student life affected by the pandemic.

However, low-income students' behavior and achievement appear to have been affected more profoundly than that of their higher-SES counterparts. Research has shown not only worsened child mental health outcomes among lower income students, but also worsened academic outcomes.

Thomas Kane, faculty director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard has stated, "learning loss will be the longest-lasting and most inequitable legacy of the pandemic" (as cited in Baumgaertner, 2023, p. 1). Betthäuser et al. (2023) conducted a systemic review in which they examined 42 studies across 15 countries to examine the learning deficits coming out of the pandemic. The researchers found that learning deficits were more pronounced in students from lower SES backgrounds, likely due to poorer access and ability to utilize technology, lower quality of the home learning environment, lack of learning support from teachers and parents or caregivers, and reduced ability to work independently (Betthäuser et al., 2023). Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated educational inequality between children from lower and higher SES backgrounds (An et al., 2021; Betthäuser et al., 2023, Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

In addition to learning loss, low-income students' mental health has also been affected coming out of the pandemic. Ng and Ng (2022) conducted a systematic review of 30 studies and found students from low-income homes exhibited key risk factors such as extended screen time, sleep disturbances, less physical activity, increased pandemic-related stressors among parents, and deteriorated mental health of parents. These key risk factors showed worsened mental health outcomes and reflected SES inequalities.

Summary

School districts and educators must come together to meet the needs of low-income students returning to school post COVID-19. The disruption in the education caused by the pandemic was detrimental to all students but especially students from low-income backgrounds. Mental health was one area affected during this time due to lack of student engagement, which has been correlated with poorer social-emotional learning. Low-income students were also not logging in to the remote learning environment compared to their higher-income peers which meant they were not engaged (Dorn et al., 2020). Early research is also showing behavior problems for students coming out of the pandemic (Sun et al., 2022). The trauma students have experienced, particularly among low-income students, is expected to have effects for years (Dorn et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Academic achievement has also been affected, and the achievement gap among lower and higher-income students has increased (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Findings from research have shown that learning loss reinforces persistent achievement disparities and gaps (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Statistical models have projected that the greatest learning loss will be greatest among low-income students and other vulnerable populations (Huck & Zhang, 2021).

Four theoretical foundations were utilized to explore different theories and approaches to handling times of crisis. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory guided the framework for this study to address and discover the levels of self-efficacy among low-income students returning to school with regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and connections. Specifically, this study encompasses the perceptions of

educators from low-income schools on of students returning to school after the pandemic. It is essential to study these teachers' perceptions so as to plan for future crises and determine how educators may respond with instruction and mental health supports. This study can provide understanding on the effects on academic performance and mental health on low-income students returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will also help teachers meet students' needs during times of crisis.

Synthesis Matrix

Researchers often use a synthesis matrix to organize study variables presented in the research, help the researcher organize references, and determine how the sources relate to each other. Creating a synthesis matrix enables the researcher to categorize different themes and arguments presented on specific topics (Ingram et al., 2006; see Appendix H).

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter details the methodology used to complete this research. The chapter 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. The chapter provides information on the research instrument used. Additionally, it also includes 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 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income 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 elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?
3. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset?
4. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Research Design

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2015), a research design describes when, from whom, and under what conditions the data will be obtained. A research design is a plan for generating the necessary evidence to be used to answer the research questions. This study utilized a qualitative design. Patton (2015) noted that whereas quantitative data is typically represented in numerical form and emphasizes impartiality during the collecting and analyzing process, qualitative research tends to be more in-depth, using an interactive and more personal approach to data collection.

In qualitative studies, the researcher attempts to explore or explain experiences with new phenomena or phenomena that have received only minimal study. The qualitative researcher looks at collected phenomena for themes to provide better insight and understanding into the way humans create meaning in their everyday lives (Patton, 2015).

There are different methods by which to frame qualitative inquiry. Qualitative designs encompass 16 different frameworks, including phenomenology (Patton, 2015). Phenomenology asserts a core question in the design and that is to understand the "meaning, structure, and essence, of the lived experience" (Patton, 2015, p. 98). A phenomenological inquiry examines the way people interpret the world. Phenomenological studies are unique in that there is an assumption of shared meaning related to commonly occurring phenomena within a culture (Creswell, 2015; Patton, 2015). After a thorough review of research design methods, a qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income students returning to school after being online following the

trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections.

The research process used for this study began with identifying a specific research problem followed by a literature review to examine the foundation of the phenomenon. The researchers then created a purpose statement and research questions that aligned with the study's theoretical framework: Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. These components helped to inform the most appropriate research design and methodology. The qualitative phenomenological approach was determined to provide the best and most adequate answers to the research questions. Data was collected and analyzed, and the results were shared once themes were extrapolated from the data. Conclusions were then interpreted from the study's findings.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2015) described a population as a group of individuals who meet specific criteria from which generalizations may be concluded regarding the results of the research study. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the United States is currently home to 13,318 public school districts. Of those 13,318 districts, 1,018 districts are in California alone and are designated as: unified, elementary, high, and those marked as other (California Department of Education, 2022). Included in these districts are 5,857 elementary schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Of these elementary schools, 3,873 receive federal funding known as Title I (California Department of Education, 2023). Title I funding is provided to schools where 40% or more of the school's student population is considered low-income and distributed by school districts (National Center

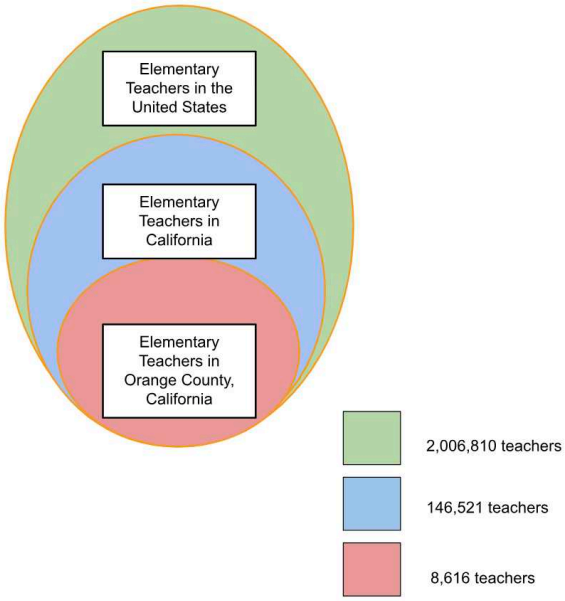
for Education Statistics, n.d.). A district is determined low-income based on the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. When looking at teachers alone, there are 4,007,908 teachers in the United States with 2,006,810 teaching in elementary schools. Additionally, there are 146,521 teachers serving in elementary schools in California (California Department of Education, 2024). Of those teachers, an estimated 8,616 serve in elementary schools in Orange County (California Department of Education, 2022). Elementary teachers serving in Title 1 schools are a characteristic of these teachers. These educators are the total population used for this study.

Sampling Frame/Target Population

In an effort to narrow the population into a sampling frame that was representative of the group, the researcher identified a target population based on the characteristics of the total population (Creswell, 2018). This target population was the entire set of individuals selected from the overall population due to delimitations of time, money, geography, and other barriers that would make it difficult to study every individual in the population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015; Patton, 2015). In Orange County, California there are approximately 8,616 elementary educators (California Department of Education, 2022). There are 33 school districts within Orange County. The population in this study was narrowed down to teachers who teach low-income K-6 students in Orange County, California, before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. See Figure 7 for the population and sample of the study.

Figure 6

Population and Sample



Sample

Sampling is selecting a subset of the population of interest of which data is collected. In research, it is important to choose a method that supports the purpose of the study. Two primary types of sampling techniques are used in research: probability and nonprobability sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Probability sampling is typically utilized in quantitative studies and draws from a large population, is generalizable, and is random. However, in qualitative studies, probability sampling is used to gain a deeper understanding of a population's experiences with a phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

This study focused on teachers serving elementary schools receiving Title I funding; therefore, purposeful sampling was utilized in selecting participants for this qualitative design. According to Patton (2015), "Purposeful sampling focuses on

selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under the study" (p. 401).

Convenience sampling was also utilized for this qualitative study. According to Creswell (2018), this type of sampling is a type of non-probability sampling where the sample being drawn from the population is in close proximity and is therefore easily accessible. By the end of the recruitment process, the selected teachers volunteered to participate in a face-to-face or optional Zoom video conferencing interview, allowing the researcher to analyze their lived experiences (Patton, 2015).

In phenomenological research, it is important to consider sample size. Creswell (2007) recommended conducting five to 25 interviews for phenomenological research; this served as a guideline for selecting the number of participants for this study. A smaller sample size lowers the generalizability of the study; however, there is a greater depth of understanding for the phenomenon under exploration (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Based on purposeful and convenience sampling, along with considering Creswell's recommendation, the new target population was 9 teachers from Title I elementary schools in Orange County. All data collected in this qualitative study was analyzed thoroughly to produce in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon.

Instrumentation

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument that drives inquiry (Patton, 2015). Different strategies are used to collect data in a qualitative study, including questionnaires with open-ended questions, interviews (both structured and unstructured), participant observation, and the collecting of artifacts such as audio-visuals and documentation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). According to McMillan and

Schumacher (2015), the most common forms of data collected in qualitative studies are interviews and participant observation. In phenomenological research, interviews are a key component of data collection (Patton, 2015). Additionally, a semi-structured interview gives the participant a chance to answer open-ended questions that align with the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Therefore, the qualitative study used semi-structured, open-ended interview questions that aligned with Bandura's self-efficacy theory with regard to academic achievement, behavior, mindset, and social connections.

Interview Design and Development

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2015), interviews are the most common form of qualitative data. Patton (2015) delineated four forms of qualitative instrumentation that are central to data collection:

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

Each type of interview will determine 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, it can be difficult to analyze conversational interviews. In contrast, closed-fixed response interviews use preformatted questions that offer a list of responses, preventing the researcher from gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Lastly, the

interview guide approach allows the participant to answer naturally due to the probes within the preformatted question (Sewell, 2023).

Semi-structured Interview

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

Primary Instrument

This study utilized a standardized open-ended interview of semi-structured questions as the primary source of data collection. The interview was designed with members from the thematic team. There was a total of nine thematic dissertation research candidates and core faculty members, which 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 with 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 the self-efficacy theory. The final interview (Appendix A) contained six questions with prompts provided to gain a deeper understanding of the question being asked. In addition to question alignment, each question is in alignment with the purpose of the study to understand educators' perceptions on 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 essential that the instrumentation used for collecting data is tested to help reduce 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. Each subgroup met back 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, and definitions that may be helpful during the interview, in addition to ensuring

confidentiality (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). The interview protocol included an introduction from the researcher, the purpose of the study, applicable definitions, and the interview script. Additionally, participants were given 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 it to the researcher. These documents were unified and used by all members of the thematic team.

Validity

Validity is frequently defined as 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 the researcher and the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). In order to establish validity in this qualitative study, the researcher utilized the following strategies to help determine validity of the measures: content validity, participant language and verbatim accounts, multiple researchers, and mechanically recorded data and participant review.

Content Validity

This specific type of validity seeks to determine 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 (Keely et al., 2013). The three faculty members leading the thematic research group served as field experts. 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 ensures that the language and terms used in interview questions are understood by the participant (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). During the development of the interview questions, the faculty member helped guide terminology that should be used and terminology that should be avoided. Additionally, the interview development team was advised to develop a short list of definitions to provide more clarification to participants if needed.

Multiple Researchers

Utilizing multiple researchers helps to increase the validity of the 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 the questions, and then conducted interviews.

Mechanically Recorded Data and Participant Review

The researcher audio recorded all interviews utilizing Zoom software. 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 utilized in both qualitative and quantitative research. In qualitative research, it can be challenging to establish reliability; 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 may 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 with regard to form and context (Thakur & Chetty, 2020).

Refutational Analysis

This method helps to support the claim of reliability within a study. This process involves not only exploring but also explaining different theories and ideas presented by individual studies (Thakur & Chetty, 2020). In Chapter II, the researcher explored and explained various theories and studies that related to COVID-19, school closures, remote learning, low-income students, and self-efficacy.

Triangulation

Triangulation describes a process where more than one source is used for data collection and analysis to establish reliability (Thakur & Chetty, 2020). Triangulation helps to ensure "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (Thakur & Chetty, 2020, p. 2). The primary source of data collection for this study was interviews. The researcher intended to supplementary data to provide multiple data sources but due to an out-of-state relocation, the researcher encountered difficulty not only in acquiring participants, but also collecting artifacts and observations. Instead, the researcher utilized reflexivity as a way to achieve triangulation through controlled bias.

Reflexivity

When a researcher monitors one's subjectivity in generating credible findings and is constantly aware of biases and personal beliefs that may affect data collection and interpretation this is called reflexivity (Darawsheh, 2014). Attia and Edge (2017) posit reflexivity can be both prospective and retrospective. The former type of reflexivity references the effect of the researcher on the research process while the latter implies the effect of the research on the person conducting it. Alternatively, reflexivity involves thinking about both one's potential interference as well as having an awareness that the research may affect the researcher's way of thinking or position regarding certain issues or topics. To account for both types of reflexivity, the researcher should practice being self-aware and know when to step back and reflect on the research process (Attia & Edge, 2017).

For this study, the researcher kept a reflective journal which included various observations, thoughts, ideas, rationale for decisions, and self-criticism. This journal was a mirror allowing the researcher to understand the reasons behind her decisions and actions and thus controlling for bias. Journaling as a part of reflexivity also enabled the researcher to examine one's involvement in and detachment from the study (Berger, 2015).

Use of Comprehensive Data and Tables

This strategy helps organize the data and establish its authenticity, which includes utilizing 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 along with Google Sheets to code 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 imperative in qualitative research because it helps to minimize researcher bias and also provides an accurate interpretation of the themes and patterns found in the data (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Peer researchers reviewed 10% of the data from this study with a level of .80 agreement. According to O'Connor and Joffe (2020), accuracy of at least 80% across peer researchers indicates that the coding is reliable.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method utilized for this phenomenological study was semi-structured recorded interviews. McMillan and Schumacher (2015) described semi-structured interviews as one of the most common sources of data for qualitative research, especially for phenomenological studies. Interviews were recorded and 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 low-income 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 this study.

Interview Process

The primary method of data collection in this study was a semi-structured, open-ended interview of 9 K-6 teachers in low-income schools 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 UMGIRB. Before each interview the participants were given documents that consisted of an informed consent form, an audio recording release (Appendix F), UMGIRB research participant Bill of Rights (Appendix E), and a copy of the interview questions (Appendix A). Once they received the documents, participants were asked to review them for clarity and then sign the consent form. After the researcher received consent, the researcher followed the interview protocol guide that had 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 60 minutes long and conducted in-person at the participant's workplace or during Zoom when it was not possible to meet in-person.

Digital recordings were completed for each interview and personally coded to ensure confidentiality. These recordings were stored in the researcher's locked home safe. During the interview, the researcher took notes to document the environment and any nonverbal cues from the participant. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the recordings and combined with the notes to be analyzed for themes or patterns. The researcher utilized Google Sheets to organize and categorize the

data. The transcripts from the interviews were uploaded into Google Drive, 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.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis entails interpreting and summarizing 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 data. Inductive analysis entails the researcher collecting the data, coding the data, identifying themes and/or patterns, and lastly presenting the findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

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, 2010; 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 interviews were 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 used Google Sheets and the transcripts to organize, categorize, and acquire the frequency of identified themes and patterns found in the data. First, the researcher reviewed the data to identify segments, or units of relevant information that are one to three sentences long. These data segments were reviewed and given codes by the researcher. Codes are words or phrases that give meaning to the specified data set (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015).

Themes and Patterns

In inductive analysis the first step is to identify themes in the data. Once similar data and codes were grouped together major and minor themes emerged. The researcher utilized the framework of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy to help guide the identification of themes throughout the data. After themes are established, patterns can then 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

Two key features of qualitative research are the narrative presentation of evidence and diversity of the visual depiction of data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2015). Additionally, in phenomenological studies, textual descriptions are utilized to describe a lived experience of what and how the experience occurred. This study utilized direct

quotes from participant interviews to accurately depict the lived experience of K-6 teachers regarding low-income students returning to school post-pandemic.

Limitations

It is imperative to be open and clear about a study's limitations and report natural limitations and weaknesses of the researcher's perspective. Limitations can affect validity, reliability, or generalizability of the study and can also 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 took steps to acknowledge and address 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). The subjective nature of qualitative inquiry and the researcher's role as the primary instrument of data collection make this type of research more prone to 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). 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 and script to help navigate the interviews and ensure questions remained the same for each participant.

Generalizability

Phenomenological studies make it difficult to generalize the findings due to the small sample size (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2009; Patton, 2015).

However, in phenomenological studies, the goal is not to generalize the findings to a larger population because it seeks out the lived experiences of individuals (smaller populations) who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, sample sizes differ based on the purpose of the study, data collection method, and participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Sample Size

In qualitative research, the sample size varies 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 smaller sample sizes allows the researcher to dive deep into the data. Due to scheduling conflicts and limited resources including exhausting all avenues of recruitment, this study was limited to 9 K-6 teachers who teach low-income students in Orange County, California. Even though there were only 9 participants, participants did not necessarily all teach in one district, thereby increasing the diversity among participants. Additionally, the thematic research group used the same data collection method, interview protocol, and analysis, totaling around 70 educators, which increased the overall sample.

Summary

Following a review of the study's purpose and research questions, this chapter highlighted the methodology of the study and provided detailed explanations as to why specific methods were chosen. The instrumentation utilized for the study aligned with the purpose of the study in determining K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income students returning to school after being online following 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

Limited research has been conducted on the effects of low-income students returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic despite its academic and behavioral effects on the educational system (An et al., 2021; Cruz, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Therefore, this study focused on K-6 elementary teachers' perspectives on low-income students returning to school after the pandemic in regard to behavior, mindset, social connections, and academic achievement.

Chapter IV begins with an overview of its contents, including a review of the purpose of the study, research questions, and methodology. Procedures for data collection are also reviewed, including a summary of the population and sample prior to the presentation of data. Each participant's data is presented according to themes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the interview findings in this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income 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 elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior?
2. How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement?

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

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

In order to determine K-6 elementary teachers' perspectives of the impact on low-income students returning to school after the pandemic, this study followed a qualitative phenomenological research design. Interviews were the primary research method utilized in this research study and are summarized in this section. Furthermore, the researcher utilized reflexivity through journaling to control bias.

Interviews

This study utilized a standardized open-ended interview of semi-structured questions as the primary source of data collection to determine the lived experiences of 12 Orange County elementary teachers regarding low-income students after being online after the trauma of a pandemic for 2 years with regard to behavior, academic achievement, mindset, and social connections. The interview consisted of six questions to answer each of the four research sub-questions. Each participant received a copy of the Letter of Invitation and the Research Participant's Bill of Rights with details of the study. In addition, the participants gave electronic consent to participate and record conversations. All interviews were transcribed using a digital recording device as well as a traditional recording device. After transcriptions were verified by the researcher and participants were sent a copy; the transcriptions were then uploaded to the Google Drive

platform. Utilizing Google Sheets, patterns were identified from the participant responses. A doctoral expert coder verified the transcription themes and transcribed information between the expert codes and the researcher, which consisted of an agreement between the coders. Both researcher and coder obtained a high percentage of integrated agreement, and as a result, potential bias was eliminated during the coding process.

Population

The overall population of this study was 2,006,810 elementary teachers in the United States. The population was narrowed down to a target population of 146,521 elementary teachers in California and from there narrowed down to 8,616 elementary teachers serving Orange County, California.

Sample

This study utilized purposeful and convenience sampling to determine the participants for this study. The study was delimited to K-6 elementary teachers who taught the same grade for at least 2 years before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Orange County, California. The study was narrowed down to Orange County, California due to the researcher's access to personal teacher connections as well as access to two school districts' teacher directories through a thematic team member. The researcher sent emails to potential participants to determine if the teachers were interested and met the criteria to participate in the study. A sample size of nine participants was considered appropriate for this study.

Demographic Data

Demographic data for this study was reported anonymously without any reference of any participant or their organization to protect confidentiality. Participants were assigned the letter P and a number as presented in Table 3, which was used to represent their demographic data. Eleven percent of teachers in the study were male and 89% female. Additionally, 56% were White, 22% were Asian, and 22% were mixed race. Of the participants, 33% held bachelor's degrees while 67% held master's degrees. Length of teaching experience among the participants ranged from 15-33 years. Furthermore, the grade levels taught ranged from 66% of the participants teaching K-3, 22% teaching all grades, and 11% teaching 4-6.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant #	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Highest Level of Education	Years Taught	Grade Level Taught
P1	Female	47	Asian/White	Bachelor's Degree	19	4-6
P2	Female	47	Asian	Master's Degree	21	K-6
P3	Female	46	Asian	Bachelor's Degree	15	K-3
P4	Female	44	White	Master's Degree	21	K-3
P5	Female	49	White	Master's Degree	25	K-3
P6	Female	47	White	Master's Degree	26	K-6
P7	Male	54	White	Master's Degree	26	K-3
P8	Female	59	White	Master's Degree	18	K-3
P9	Female	61	Hispanic/White	Bachelor's Degree	33	K-3

Presentation of the Findings

This section of the study presents the data and findings. The findings are grouped by research question.

Research Question 1

How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to behavior? Table 4 displays the four 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. Motivation decreased	29	6
2. Confidence decreased (self-efficacy)	18	6
3. School behavior norms changed	12	9
4. Student engagement decreased	9	7
Theme: Behavior was negatively affected.	68	9

The researcher observed four major codes related to the research question during the analysis of the data: (a) motivation decreased, (b) confidence decreased (self-efficacy), (c) school behavior norms changed, and (d) learning loss evident.

Motivation Decreased

Sixty-seven percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit decreased motivation with a frequency of 29 times. P1 shared, “Motivation. It plays a big factor. You know some of the kids when the going gets tough instead of having it intrinsic in them they just give up.” P5 stated, “If there isn’t a prize at the end, I might not try it and they don’t. I definitely see a difference between those students that have a drive and those students that don’t have a drive.”

Confidence Decreased (Self-Efficacy)

Sixty-seven percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit decreased confidence with a frequency of 18 times. P2 shared,

> I have to sometimes spoon feed everything to them to get them to a point where they can start to feel comfortable and confident enough to do it…. It feels like they're quicker to just kind of give up and think that, you know, there's nothing they can do about it or they're waiting for me to kind of show them what to do.

School Behavior Norms Changed

One hundred percent of the participants observed change sin school behavior norms that had an effect on low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with a frequency of 12. P6 shared,

> And it was like, they were so regimented during that hybrid year of like 6 feet apart and stay in my cubicle. And then it was like don't touch anyone. We couldn't share supplies. And then, when they came back, it was like the opposite of that, like no boundary, like no filter, no, was like one extreme to the other.

P6 also stated, "And then it's also a unique time because the behavior is escalating, but we're being told like we can't suspend. We can't have punitive consequences."

Student Engagement Decreased

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting a decrease in engagement with a frequency of 12. P6 shared,

> They need to be taught how to interact with learning again and like taught how to almost think again. Like how to engage, like to get them to engage is challenging and I think some are now hopefully seeing some success and some accountabilities at school.

P8 stated, "I teach second grade, but their attention span is sometimes that of a gnat."

Research Question 2

How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to academic achievement? Table 5 highlights the five codes that emerged from the data followed by their frequency and sources.

Table 5

Frequency of Codes and Sources: Research Question #2

Codes	Frequency:	Sources
1. Mindset affected self-efficacy	46	7
2. Home environment affected	20	8
3. Gradual release model decreased (independent learning)	19	8
4. Motivation decreased	15	6
5. Confidence decreased (self-efficacy)	12	6
Theme: Home and environmental support affected academic achievement	112	8

The researcher observed five major codes related to the research question during the analysis of the data: (a) mindset affected self-efficacy, (b) home environment affected, (c) gradual release model decreased (independent learning), (d) motivation decreased, and (e) confidence decreased (self-efficacy).

Mindset Affected Self-Efficacy

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed mindset affected self-efficacy among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with a frequency of 16. P3 shared, “And so just recently, if we’re gonna kind of talk about current, their growth mindset actually is really good, like their willingness to take risk, their participation is high. They’re not afraid to share their ideas.” P4 stated,

> Kind of that fixed versus growth mindset and that has a huge impact. My kids who have a growth mindset, they will ask for help. They will seek out assistance when they don’t understand something. They don’t just shut down and give up whereas my students that have a fixed mindset are like, “This is hard.”

Home Environment Affected Self-Efficacy

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed home environment affected self-efficacy among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with a frequency of 20. P6 shared,

> I think for students that had some decent self-motivation or skills before COVID and then had someone in their family be able to be supportive or present with them, you know, helping them and guiding them. I think those students fared better academically.

P1 stated,

> So, I think some of those students with no connection from home, you know, you learn not to do your work and then you come back to school. And it’s kind of like, even though I know I should be doing my work it’s not enforced so why do it?

Gradual Release Model Decreased (Independent Learning)

Eighty-eight percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit decreased independent learning with a frequency of 19. P4 shared,

> And some kids, if I'm not actively writing answers on mine, they're doing nothing, and it's not until I start filling it out then they just copy me. Like up for a lot of kids after the pandemic, their idea of doing work is just doing whatever I do.

P5 stated,

> Most of my students have an I-can't-do attitude. They want someone to do it for them. They want to be self-guided or in an old-fashioned term, spoon fed, as much as possible. They give up pretty easy as well and need a lot of encouragement.

Motivation Decreased

Sixty-seven percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit decreased motivation with a frequency of 15. P6 shared,

> Students are harder to motivate now since COVID. That some of them have trouble asking for help or starting a task without a lot of direction. Yes, overall, they just seem harder to engage and more passive in a lot of the education experience.

P1 stated,

> Students, you tell them, you know, "You read at a second-grade level. What should you be doing every night, you know? You should be reading every night to try to help

yourself," and then they don't have it within, they don't have the motivation within themselves to do it. They're just, "Okay, I'll just continue to read at a low level."

Confidence Decreased (Self-Efficacy)

Sixty-seven percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting decreased confidence with a frequency of 12. P2 shared, "But now I find I'm doing that with the sixth graders, fifth graders, fourth graders I'm working with also because they do seem just quick to get frustrated and quick to give up." P4 stated, "Overall what I'm seeing with students now is they will sit there helpless and just do nothing and not advocate for themselves as much as they did prior to that, prior to the pandemic."

Research Question 3

How do elementary teachers describe the impact on lower-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset? Table 6 highlights the four codes that emerged from the data followed with their frequency and sources.

Table 6

Frequency of Codes and Sources: Research Question #3

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Persistence/perseverance decreased	52	7
2. Uncertainty and helpless behavior increased	45	8
3. Motivation decreased	28	6
4. Learning loss evident	13	4
Theme: Growth mindset was diminished.	138	8

The researcher observed four major codes related to the research question during the analysis of the data: (a) persistence/perseverance decreased, (b) uncertainty and helpless behavior increased, (c) motivation decreased, and (d) learning loss evident.

Persistence/Perseverance Decreased

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit decreased persistence/perseverance with a frequency of 52. P2 shared, “From what I’m seeing, I’m guessing the sense of if I’m not good at it the first time then I’m just not good at it.” P4 stated, “Yes, so I feel like overall what my students are lacking right now is grit. They don’t have the grit to persevere when things are new or different or hard.”

Uncertainty and Helpless Behavior Increased

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting uncertainty and helpless behavior with a frequency of 45 times. P4 shared, “Overall what I’m seeing with students now is they will sit there helpless and just do nothing and not advocate for themselves as much as they did prior to that, prior to the pandemic.” P6 stated,

> And it’s taken a lot of trying to point out to the students when they are succeeding and what *they* can do and teaching them those behaviors of what do you do if you can’t figure it out. You don’t just sit there.

Motivation Decreased

Sixty-seven percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting decreased motivation with a frequency of 28. P1 shared,

> Kind of that fixed versus growth mindset and that has a huge impact. My kids who have a growth mindset, they will ask for help. They will seek out assistance

> when they don't understand something. They don't just shut down and give up whereas my students that have a fixed mindset are like this is hard.

P6 stated, "So, coming out of that, I think that motivation is a lot worse, and it's taken more teacher input and more maybe extrinsic motivation because the internal is not there."

Learning Loss Evident

Forty-four percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting learning loss with a frequency of 13. P1 shared,

> That year we were home, that's 2 years of school that didn't really count. We didn't really, you know, do state testing and there wasn't much to keep the kids accountable. You learn not to do your work and then you come back to school. And it's kind of like, even though I know I should be doing my work it's not enforced so why do it?

P8 stated,

> It's taking longer after COVID because parents didn't take the time to say, "Hey, count this, how many are there?" They didn't. So, to gaining where they need to be on grade level, it's taking longer. Math, reading. If I get to science and that kind of stuff, I'm giving it, you know? ELPAC, we work really hard on that language to get them into being, you know, FEP.

Research Question 4

How do elementary teachers describe the impact on low-income students of returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to social connections?

Table 7 presents the four codes that emerged from the data accompanied by the frequency and sources.

Table 7

Frequency of Codes and Sources: Research Question #4

Codes	Frequency	Sources
1. Need for classroom culture increased	9	8
2. Social norms were affected	8	8
3. Peer interaction affected	8	7
4. Small group interaction willingness decreased	8	7
Theme: Social connections were not sustained.	33	8

The researcher observed four major codes related to the research question during the analysis of the data: (a) social norms were affected, (b) need for classroom culture increased, (c) peer interaction affected, and (d) small group interaction willingness decreased.

Need for Classroom Culture Increased

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting an increase in need for classroom culture with a frequency of 8. P3 shared,

> I created this culture, where, like, I'll give you an example of the environment. When you walked in, I had a class. My roster was 17 kids for one year. This was 2 years after the pandemic. 2022-2023. Yeah. So, my formation of my desk, my design was to put them in a circle. So, my class and I were in the circle, so I had, there's no teacher desk, if you could say. I defronted the room where you wouldn't know where the holder of knowledge was, you know? It wasn't me. It was everybody's. So, I changed that in response to what I was noticing pre and post-pandemic.

P8 also stated,

> And then sometimes the ones who got help finally get it. Can I help somebody? Of course you can. Of course you can. And you're on one-to-one. You're not, you know, like an old lady over there. I got someone. They get it. They can help me. I don't feel intimidated.

Social Norms Were Affected

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting affected social norms with a frequency of 9. P1 shared,

> There's no sense of rules anymore with some of the kids. And then it's just kind of like, well, you know, if you can't enforce the rules, why do I care about my future? Doing the bare minimum or not doing anything at all and I guess, kind of with education now it's like what can you do with me because I yell at you and you just smile.

P2 stated,

> And I see there's this need for connection, but it's coming out in a really strange way. It's coming out in this very, I want to say immature, even though they are kids, but it's coming out in an immature way for their age.

Peer Interaction Affected

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting affected peer interaction with a frequency of 8. P2 shared,

> Where they want connection, but it's like trying to get each other's attention and trying to get the other kid to react to what they're doing and I don't know if that's also a TikTok thing where you're just performing to get the attention in real life versus, you know, on a screen, but that seems to the way that they're connecting.

P5 stated, "I also see a larger group of them playing alone where they don't want to play a game together like socially together."

Willingness to Engage in Small Group Interaction Decreased

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting a decrease in willingness to interacts in small groups with a frequency of 8. P2 shared,

> I see that it's harder for them to have conversations and work together and I don't know if that has to do with, you know, what happened during the pandemic and not being able to socialize and be able to work together on things.

P5 stated,

> I've also seen students not being able to sit next to each other to work like in a pod of four to five students. In previous times we would have them chit chat a lot or work and be elbow partners or those types of things, and they don't want to work together as a group. It's all, "I'll just do it by myself."

General Finding: Changes in Self-Efficacy

Table 8 highlights the five codes that emerged from the data followed with their frequency and sources.

Table 8

Frequency and Codes and Sources: General Finding

Codes:	Frequency:	Sources:
1. Teachers modified instruction	74	8
2. Gradual release model decreased (independent learning)	47	8
3. Risk-taking behavior decreased	45	8
4. Home environment affected students	25	7
5. Confidence decreased (self-efficacy	22	7
Theme: Self-efficacy changed.	216	8

The researcher observed five major codes related to the research question during the analysis of the data: (a) teachers modified instruction, (b) gradual release model decreased (independent learning), (c) risk-taking behavior decreased, (d) home environment affected students, and (5) confidence decreased (self-efficacy).

Teachers Modified Instruction

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed that they needed to modify instruction with low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with a frequency of 74. P3 shared,

> I never used to do this practice. But I tell you, right after that pandemic, having those small cohorts and then just finding a way for students to talk again. This was such a great tool for me and for the students to talk, you know, to talk and share ideas. So that, so anyways, yes, so that's the practice I've actually been doing the last 3 years. Post-pandemic.

P6 stated,

> Like they need to be taught how to interact with learning again and like taught how to almost think again. Like how to engage, like to get them to engage is

challenging and I think some are now hopefully seeing some success and some accountabilities at school.

Gradual Release Model Decreased (Independent Learning)

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed decreased use of the gradual release model with low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibit with a frequency of 47. P4 shared,

> When we're writing to a response or we're responding to a prompt. If I give an example, they will just write what I wrote, even if it doesn't apply to them. Like we're writing about our favorite Christmas food, or whatever. If I say it's hot chocolate, half the class is gonna write about hot chocolate, whether they like it or not. So I don't know if that answers your question.

P2 stated,

> I can't just expect them to come in and do a science experiment right away especially if I know it's going to be what challenges them. I have to frontload them with the right mindset first and then I have to sometimes spoon feed everything to them to get them to a point where they can start to feel comfortable and confident enough to do it.

Risk-Taking Behavior Decreased

Eighty-nine percent of the participants observed low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibiting a decrease in risk-taking behavior with a frequency of 45. P4 shared,

> So, I really have to get to know them and understand the ones who are self-starters, the ones who, even, you know, can have productive struggle, but still be

> successful versus the ones who, they take a look at it, they don't get it, and so they just completely shut down and like tune out, basically tune out from the entire lesson.

P2 stated,

> So, there's a lot of nudging or supporting or at least, you know, that one kid who like is in love with science and just figures it out or already had background knowledge that could help them figure it out quicker.

Home Environment Affected Students

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed how home environment affects low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with a frequency of 25. P6 shared, "I think if the family didn't have a higher expectation, then they kind of continued that mindset when they came back to school." P1 stated,

> When you communicated with the families it kind of was like well, we sent them to school to learn so that's your job. A lot of blaming the pandemic. It's not our fault we had to learn from home. And I think maybe you know, when a lot of the students, depending on how their family felt about learning from home, and you know what side of the pandemic they fell on, that definitely affected their mindset and their work habits.

Confidence Decreased (Self-Efficacy)

Seventy-eight percent of the participants observed that low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years exhibited decreased confidence with a frequency of 22. P6 shared,

> They learn to be passive. I think they, so much was out of their control that they kind of just that also kind of probably impacted their self-efficacy of like, I can't control anything. And all these horrible things are going on in the world and in my home.

P1 stated, "I think students who maybe don't have a strong family support - they are definitely not with a growth mindset anymore and it sometimes seems like they lack the tools to problem solve."

Summary

The chapter began by revisiting the purpose statement, research questions, and methodology. This phenomenological study cultivated data from nine interviews that examined Title I elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact on low-income 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 22 codes and 557 frequencies.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V summarizes the research study by revisiting the purpose statement, research questions, methods, population, and sample. Major findings for each research question are discussed, after which the researcher then draws conclusions and outlines implications for action. The chapter concludes with further research recommendations and the researcher's closing remarks.

Methodology Review

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine K-6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income elementary 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 research questions were as follows:

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

The researcher utilized purposeful and convenience sampling to identify potential candidates to participate in the study who met the predetermined criteria and who were

willing and available to participate. The researcher enlisted the support of former colleagues, colleagues from her university affiliation, acquaintances, and the social media platforms Facebook and LinkedIn. In the invitation to participate, the researcher listed the study's purpose, the criteria for participation, the medium where the interview would take place, the length of the interview, and the assurance that participants' identities would remain anonymous. The researcher invited participants who met criteria to contact her via email or text. Interested participants were provided an introduction email describing the nature of the study, a copy of the UMass Global Research Participant's Bill of Rights, Informed Consent and Audio Recording Release, interview and demographic questions, and definitions. Interested participants contacted the researcher stating that they met the criteria, agreed to willingly participate, and had signed the consent form. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with nine K-6 elementary school teachers serving low-income students in Orange County, California. All interviews were conducted following a protocol to ensure accuracy and minimize bias.

Major Findings

After analyzing the data, codes, and themes, the researcher determined eight major findings related to low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The findings indicated that teachers modified their instruction in response to students because they exhibited decreased motivation, a lack of independent learning, decreased confidence, decreased persistence, and a fixed mindset, all of which affected their self-efficacy. Furthermore, the participants strongly indicated that a student's home environment made an impact as they returned to the classroom. Teachers reported that

students' risk-taking behavior decreased accompanied by an increase in helpless behavior.

Major Finding 1: Teachers Modified Instruction

Eighty-nine percent of the teacher participants indicated that they modified instruction in response to students coming out of the pandemic with a high frequency of 74. This finding related to the general finding presented in Chapter IV regarding changes in self-efficacy. This finding supports Herbert Walberg's (1984) educational productivity theory in that a student's psychological characteristics as well as their psychological environment influence education. According to participants, students coming out of online learning exhibited significant decreases in motivation and confidence. According to Walberg, characteristics of students, instruction, and the psychological environment are necessary components of learning.

Furthermore, the finding also supports Arnold's (2012) social disruption theory, a framework that utilizes conceptual models to serve as a lens for looking at human adaptation, perception, and habituation over time, including the implications for the individual as well as the collective community. The findings from this study indicate that most of the participants adapted to students coming out of the pandemic supporting Arnold's theory. Participant 6 had noted, "They need to be taught how to interact with learning again and taught how to almost think again. To get them to engage is challenging." Students required modified instruction and the teacher participants adapted for the good of the community.

Major Finding 2: Motivation Decreased Among Students

Sixty-seven percent of participants indicated that motivation decreased among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years. However, more telling, the frequency count for this finding was 72. Interestingly, this finding was a crossover finding emerging under not only the first research question regarding behavior, but also the third research question regarding mindset. Furthermore, this finding also fell under the general finding of changes in self-efficacy.

This decrease in motivation relates to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which posits that learning is affected by cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors. Students learned online during the pandemic which was a change in the learning environment. Additionally, Bandura delineated four key experiences that occur during the process of learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Although attention, retention, and reproduction were difficult to measure during the students' time online, Wood and Bandura (1989) highlighted the importance of motivation in learning. Motivation helps the learner with the attention, practice, and retention aspects of learning. The participants in this study observed a decrease in motivation among students coming out of the pandemic. Participant 1 shared, "Motivation. It plays a big factor. You know, some of the kids when the going gets tough instead of having that intrinsic in them they just give up."

This decrease in motivation also related to the theoretical framework which is Bandura's (1986) theory of self-efficacy. Bandura believed a person's self-efficacy can help shape the foundation for "motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment" (as

cited in Lopez-Garrido, 2023, p. 1). This finding of decreased motivation and the importance of motivation is strongly supported by Bandura's theories.

Major Finding 3: Gradual Release Model Decreased (Independent Learning)

One hundred percent of teacher participants indicated that independent learning decreased among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years. This finding was a crossover theme/finding emerging under not only the second research question regarding academic achievement, but also the general finding of changes in self-efficacy. This finding supports the social cognitive theory as well as the theoretical framework for this study: Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

According to Bandura (2001), concepts critical for learning include human agency, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. The concept of human agency posits that learners make an intentional decision to learn as well as enact that behavior change. All participants in this study noted changes in student self-efficacy and in particular their willingness to learn independently. Participant 5 stated,

> Most of my students have an I-can't-do attitude. They want someone to do it for them. They want to be self-guided or in an old-fashioned term, spoon fed, as much as possible. They give up pretty easy as well and need a lot of encouragement.

The primary feature of human agency is its "power to originate actions for given purposes" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Participants in this study indicated a lack of human agency among their students, requiring them to extend the gradual release model.

Major Finding 4: Confidence Decreased Among Students

Seventy-eight percent of participants indicated a decrease in confidence among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years. This finding was a crossover finding emerging under both the first and second research questions regarding behavior and academic achievement and also the general finding of changes in self-efficacy.

This finding supports the theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to be successful in controlling actions or events in their lives. Self-efficacy relies on confidence and belief in oneself, which may include confidence in an individual's motivation, behavior, and social environment. Most of the participants indicated that students lacked confidence during the learning process. Participant 2 shared "I have to sometimes spoon feed everything to them to get them to a point where they can start to feel comfortable and confident enough to do it."

Major Finding 5: Persistence/Perseverance Decreased

Seventy-eight percent of participants indicated persistence/perseverance decreased among low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years. The frequency count for this finding was 52. This finding aligned with research question 3 with regard to mindset. The decrease in student persistence and perseverance noted by teacher participants is supported by Bandura's social cognitive theory and his theory of self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), people with a low sense of personal agency may become apathetic and fail to achieve their desired and valued outcomes. Bandura posited that beliefs in personal efficacy constitute a factor of human agency. Participant 4

stated, “Yes, so I feel like overall what my students are lacking right now is grit. They don’t have the grit to persevere when things are new or different or hard.” According to Bandura, if people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen.

Major Finding 6: Mindset Affected Self-Efficacy

Seventy-eight percent of participants indicated that mindset affected self-efficacy among students. This finding aligned with research question 3 with regard to mindset. Teacher participants sometimes referenced students having or not having a growth mindset. A growth mindset is the belief that ability can change as a result of effort, perseverance, and practice (Transforming Education, 2020). Conversely, having a fixed mindset is the belief that one cannot change. Participant 4 stated,

> My kids who have a growth mindset, they will ask for help. They will seek out assistance when they don’t understand something. They don’t just shut down and give up whereas my students that have a fixed mindset are like this is hard.

This finding is supported by Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy in that self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability similarly to having a growth mindset. According to Lopez-Garrido (2023), having high self-efficacy is beneficial in that it leads to resilience to adversity and stress, healthy lifestyle habits, improved employee or student performance, and educational achievement.

Major Finding 7: Students’ Home Environment Mattered

One hundred percent of participants indicated students’ that home environment mattered with a frequency of 45. This is also a crossover finding found in both research question two on academic achievement as well as the general finding of changes in self-

efficacy. This finding is also supported by SCCT as well as Bandura's theory of self-efficacy.

School districts in Orange County, California transitioned to online learning to address the physical and psychological needs of students in 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Coombs (2016), addressing these needs must come first, before worrying about an organization's reputation; this is the basis of SCCT. Students learned from home and according to most participants, their home environment affected self-efficacy. Participant 6 shared,

> I think for students that had some decent self-motivation or skills before COVID and then had someone in their family be able to be supportive or present with them, you know, helping them and guiding them. I think those students fared better academically.

The theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy also supported this finding that home environment affected self-efficacy. Bandura posited, "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). This is also known as triadic reciprocal causation. A student's personal factors, including environmental events in particular, are supported by this study's findings.

Major Finding 8: Risk-Taking Behavior Decreased and Helpless Behavior Increased

Eighty-nine percent of participants noted that low-income students exhibited a decrease in risk-taking behavior and an increase in helpless behavior when returning to school after being online for 2 years. These findings were found in relation to research

question 1 regarding behavior. This finding is supported by Walberg et al.'s (1982) educational productivity theory, Bandura's social cognitive/social learning theory, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

Educational productivity theory addresses how to make learning more effective and productive. Walberg et al. (1982) defined effective learning as students reaching stated goals and productive learning as maximizing student performance or goals while utilizing resources such as their own and the teacher's time. However, according to participants, as a result of the pandemic, risk-taking decreased and helplessness increased, affecting student performance and goal attainment. Additionally, Bandura's theories supported the findings.

Bandura's (1997) theories, both on social cognitive and self-efficacy, include the importance of concepts such as human agency. The primary feature of human agency is its "power to originate actions for given purposes" (p. 3). Participants noted that students lack human agency post-pandemic. Participant 4 shared "Overall what I'm seeing with students now is they will sit there helpless and just do nothing and not advocate for themselves as much as they did prior to that, prior to the pandemic." According to participants, students were not exhibiting human agency.

Unexpected Findings

After thoroughly analyzing the qualitative data, two unexpected findings emerged.

Unexpected Finding 1: Learning Loss

Out of the participants, 70% indicated learning loss among students, but the total frequency was 13, and compared to the other findings this frequency was low. Thomas

Kane, faculty director of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard, stated, "learning loss will be the longest-lasting and most inequitable legacy of the pandemic" (as cited in Baumgaertner, 2023, p. 1). Additionally, findings from research have shown that learning loss reinforces persistent achievement disparities and gaps (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Participants' answers to the interview questions seemed to focus more on motivation and engagement rather than learning loss itself. Participant 8 stated, "Gaining where they need to be on grade level, it's taking longer."

Unexpected Finding 2: Social Connections

Eighty-nine percent of participants noted a need for classroom culture, social norms were affected, peer interaction was affected, and small group interaction decreased. However, the frequencies were low for all the findings. It should be noted that student engagement has been found to have a connection to social emotional learning (Dorn et al., 2020). Participants did indicate a decrease in engagement with a frequency of 12. Participant 6 shared

> They need to be taught how to interact with learning again and like taught how to almost think again. Like how to engage, like to get them to engage is challenging and I think some are now hopefully seeing some success and some accountabilities at school.

Conclusions

This study focused on examining the lived experiences of K-6 elementary teachers working with low-income students following the 2-year educational/social/emotional trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to student mindset, behavior, academic achievement, and social connections. The following

conclusions were drawn from the findings supported by literature that aligns with the theoretical foundations used to guide the research in this study: SCCT, educational productivity theory, and social learning/social cognitive theory. Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory was utilized as the theoretical framework to guide the development of this research study. The variables of mindset, behavior, academic achievement, and social connections were utilized to answer the research questions in relation to the teachers' perspective about the impacts on student self-efficacy.

Conclusion 1

Based on the data and literature, it can be concluded that teachers must take action to address the changes in student confidence after returning to in-person learning and connect their experience to their home learning environment with the actions implemented and needed as they return to in-person learning. One hundred percent of participants concurred that students' home environment affected their self-efficacy when they returned to in-person instruction. Individuals with low SES tend to already lack resources that promote an environment conducive to studying and learning, and this must be addressed (Davis-Kean, 2005). Participant 9 shared of her students during their time at home, "When I did home visits it was sad because I saw some kids home alone." Teacher participants addressed these changes and emphasized the need to continue to find ways to increase students' confidence.

Through this process the researcher learned teachers can address student confidence by encouraging a growth mindset, not overcorrecting, making extra time for students who need it, and ensuring students play an active role in their learning (Robinson, 2017). Participant 3 noted,

> I defronted the room where you wouldn't know where the holder of knowledge was. It wasn't me. It was everybody's. I changed that in response to what I was noticing pre and post-pandemic. They needed to have this in order to build self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1997), enactive mastery experiences, vicarious (or observational) experiences, social persuasions, and physiological and psychological states are necessary to bolster students' self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy relies on confidence and belief in oneself. Findings concluded that the home learning environment affected confidence, which in turn affected student self-efficacy. There must be systems in place to address these changes in student self-efficacy.

Conclusion 2

Based on the data and literature, it can be concluded that schools, school site leadership, and classroom teachers must plan and respond to the decrease in motivation that occurred when returning to school post-pandemic, including steps to build back their self-efficacy. Participant 1 stated "That year we were home, that's 2 years of school that didn't really count. We didn't really, you know, do state testing and there wasn't much to keep the kids accountable." Participant 1 continued, "You learn not to do your work and then you come back to school. And it's kind of like, even though I know I should be doing my work it's not enforced so why do it?" Accountability and expectations were diminished during online learning which affected student motivation coming out of the pandemic.

There are ways in which teachers can increase motivation, such as establishing clear learning outcomes, creating a positive learning environment, incorporating variety

in classroom structure and activities, offering constructive and encouraging feedback, and providing small opportunities for early success (Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Bandura (1993) noted positive relationships between self-efficacy and motivation, highlighting the need to increase student motivation as they return to in-person learning.

Self-efficacy relates to success in school. Usher and Pajares (2008) suggested that self-efficacy is a more reliable indicator of a student's academic success than an objective assessment. Additionally, Caprara et al. (2008) further found a relationship between self-efficacy and academic success, finding a negative predictive relationship between self-efficacy and dropout rates. There is a need for systems and strategies to address motivation, especially among low SES students coming out of the pandemic.

Conclusion 3

Based on the data and literature, it can be concluded that teachers must acknowledge and respond to the changes in classroom behavior, which included decreased persistence/perseverance, decreased risk-taking behavior, and increased helpless behavior. Participant 4 shared an example of this, stating, "My kids who have a growth mindset, they will ask for help. They will seek out assistance when they don't understand something. They don't just shut down and give up." Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy expresses the belief in one's ability similar to having a growth mindset.

One way to address these behaviors is to place focus on having a growth mindset. According to Transforming Education (2020), a growth mindset is the belief that ability can change as a result of effort, perseverance, and practice. Furthermore, Dr. Carol Dweck researched growth mindset effects in education and found that having a growth

mindset drives motivation and achievement (Transforming Education, 2020). It is imperative that teachers help guide their students toward a growth mindset in order to respond to the changes in classroom behavior coming out of at-home learning.

Conclusion 4

Based on the data and literature, it can be concluded that in response to post-pandemic changes in self-efficacy, instruction and learning must be modified. All stakeholders who interact with students in their learning environment must plan, teach, check, and act according to formative assessments in real time to ensure success and increased self-efficacy. Although it was imperative to note the stakeholders' (students') physical and psychological needs during a crisis as per the SCCT, it is also imperative to address these needs coming out of the crisis as well (Coombs, 2016). Participant 6 shared, "So, coming out of that, I think that motivation is a lot worse, and it's taken more teacher input and more maybe extrinsic motivation because the internal is not there."

To address changes in student self-efficacy, teachers need to not only instill a growth mindset to improve self-efficacy, but also include strategies such as instructional pacing, setting clear course objectives, intervention, and checking for understanding as a response to the change. Walberg et al. (1982) emphasized that students reaching stated goals and maximizing student performance are essential to effective learning. With these change in student self-efficacy post-pandemic, effective learning strategies are needed and must be addressed.

Conclusion 5

The data and literature indicated that there was a cascading effect on the classroom environment based on the change in student self-efficacy post-pandemic. Most

participants noted that students exhibited a fixed mindset. Students held the belief that they could not change. This affected other areas, including decreased motivation, decreased confidence, a lack of independent learning, decreased risk-taking, decreased persistence, and an increase in helpless behavior. Bandura (1996, 2001) noted that self-efficacy is a high predictor of student achievement. Furthermore, Bandura (2002) also suggested that self-efficacy is one of the basic capacities of human nature, and thus it applies to all cultures. Research also shows that although SES plays a role in academic achievement, self-efficacy is imperative regardless of SES (Jurecska, 2012). Teachers must respond to this change of self-efficacy by instilling a growth mindset and modifying instruction.

Implications for Action

Implication for Action 1: Communication and Support Plan

Based on the conclusion that teachers must address the changes in student confidence and their experience in their home learning environment as they return to in-person learning, it is recommended that a plan be developed before the start of school that involves all stakeholders. This plan would provide resources for the home environment to support learning and success for the student including a checklist for school and home as well as monthly communication from the teacher to the parents/guardians. This plan would allow students to become connected to learning and their future when all adults, both at home and at school, are working together for their success.

Implication for Action 2: Promote Educator Understanding on Student Motivation

Based on the conclusion that students underwent a decrease in motivation when returning to school, which affected their self-efficacy, it is recommended that all staff at a

school site or district participate in a book study and/or professional development training around research or a book like *Drive* by Daniel Pink (2011). However, this must be followed by a strategic plan for implementation of strategies that increase motivation in the classroom.

The strategic plan should be developed by an implementation task force at the end of the school year in preparation for the next school year. It should include summer reading with a stipend for tasks or meetings. This is important because in response to students' decrease in motivation, many teachers began to offer extrinsic rewards despite understanding the need for intrinsic motivation. Staff and students need to understand motivation theory and how to apply it to mindset, self-efficacy, and daily classroom practices.

Implication for Action 3: School Districts Must Provide Professional Development

Based on the conclusion that teachers must acknowledge and respond to the changes in classroom behavior, it is recommended that school districts invest in professional development that addresses strategies to increase engagement and risk-taking behavior. These trainings would be for classroom teachers and instructional leaders to support and address implementation of strategies that increase these behaviors.

Professional development trainings should be conducted by experts. Top authors or educators should be invited to lead these trainings and planning should include school site visits to neighboring schools that have already implemented engagement strategies or risk-taking behavior. This is important because classroom climate connects with the culture of the school. The focus on learning rather than assignment completion and grades will increase engagement and risk-taking behavior.

Implication for Action 4: Schools Need Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Based on the conclusion that in response to the changes in students' self-efficacy, instruction and learning must be modified, it is recommended that school districts invest in professional development to address performance data, subskill deficit data, and high leverage instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners. This can be done by forming professional learning communities (PLCs). With PLCs, small groups of teachers/staff are formed based on subject matter and/or grade level. Focusing on data-driven strategies will help these PLCs take next instructional steps in regard to increasing self-efficacy and adapting to the learning environment.

Implication for Action 5: Incorporate and Promote Growth Mindset

Based on the conclusion that there was a cascading effect on the classroom environment based on the change in students' self-efficacy, it is recommended that schools promote having a growth mindset in a school wide systematic way for everyone at the school site. Promoting a growth mindset in the classroom and school wide will help enhance self-efficacy skills such as persistence, perseverance, learning from mistakes, and motivation. These skills will also help students become more resilient and seep into other areas of their life. Furthermore, school districts can provide professional development trainings on growth mindset as well as resources in order to address self-efficacy skills and overall school performance.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study contributed to the findings of K-6 teacher perceptions on low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years with regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The study is a snapshot of the

perceptions of K-6 teachers and invites other researchers to explore low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years. Based on the data the following are recommended for further research:

- This study focused on K-6 teacher perceptions in Orange County, CA. Future studies should be expanded to include other cities and states to add to the current knowledge of low-income students returning to school after a pandemic.
- This study focused only on general education teachers who taught K-6. It is suggested that future research expand to middle school, high school, and college to compare similarities and differences among low-income students.
- This study focused on K-6 teacher perceptions of low-income students. It is suggested that future research expand to teachers of students in more middle and higher SES populations. Researchers could compare similarities and differences among different SES populations.
- This study only looked at general education teachers. It is recommended that special education teachers be included in the sample in future studies. This will add to growing research and allow researchers to compare general education students and special education students.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

This dissertation enabled me to explore an area of personal interest and gain a deeper understanding of K-6 teachers' perceptions of low-income students returning to school after being online for 2 years in regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. The time and effort spent in this research was necessary. I am

incredibly thankful and inspired by my husband, children, thematic team, cohort mentor and cohort, and dissertation chair and committee.

Data collected from this study will be available for examination by the next few generations as we continue to heal and address the traumas of coming out of a pandemic. It is evident from the research that self-efficacy has decreased among low-income students with regard to mindset, behavior, social connections, and academic achievement. This decrease in self-efficacy has made an impact on students as they return to school after being online for 2 years. K-6 teachers of low-income students shared their perspectives with examples to help the researcher understand how and why remote learning during the pandemic affected students. This dissertation also leaves room for expanding research into other areas to explore different populations.

This study was imperative due to the recency of COVID-19 pandemic; thus, there is a gap in research. The pandemic affected most individuals and there is an essential need to learn how to plan for future crises, particularly in education.

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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 student's 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 student's self-efficacy?)*

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

Social Connections: (2)

4. What social connections do you feel impacted your student's 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. How long have you been a teacher of low-income students:
6. What 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 Sarah Orendorff and 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 K6 educators' perceptions on 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.
Our team is conducting interviews with K6 teachers like yourself. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully, will provide a clear picture of teachers' perceptions on low-income 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 and Audio Recording Release

INFORMATION ABOUT: The perceptions of K-6 educators on the impact on low income students returning to school post-pandemic.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Sarah Orendorff

PURPOSE OF STUDY*:*

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Orendorff, 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 educators' perceptions of the impact on K-6 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.

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 Sarah Orendorff, at sorendor@mail.umassglobal.edu or by phone at [redacted] or Dr. Goodman (chair) at lgoodman@umassglobal.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 or Responsible Party

_____ Date:

Signature of Principal Investigator

APPENDIX G

Human Subjects Research Course Completion Certificate

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 17-May-2022
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 48966465

This is to certify that:

Sarah Orendorff

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

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wb394dfed-8593-4d10-b04e-850ad5265882-48966465

APPENDIX H

Synthesis Matrix

Title: Returning								
	COVID-19	Academic Impact	Mental Health Impact	Academic Development	Cognitive Development	Social-Emotional Development	Mental Health	Low-Income
Ali, M. M., West, K., Teich, J. L., Lynch, S., Mutter, R., & Dubenitz, J. (2019). Utilization of mental health services in educational setting by adolescents in the United States. Journal of School Health, 89(5), 393–401. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12753			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	X	X	X					
American Psychological Association. (2020). Student mental health during and after COVID-19: How can schools identify youth who need support?	X		X					
An, Y., Kaplan-Rakowski, R., Yang, J., Conan, J., Kir K-12 teachers' feelings, experiences, and perspective stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational Techı 2589-2613.	X	X	X					
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.								
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Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: the exercise of control. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.								
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Bandura, A. (1981). Self-referent thought: A developmental analysis of self-efficacy. In J. H. Flavell, & L. Ross (Eds.), Social Cognitive Development: Frontiers and Possible Futures (pp. 200-239). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.								
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Bandura, A. (2001). Social Cognitive Theory: An agentic perspective. Annual Review of Psychology, 52(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1								
Barbour, R. (2007). Doing focus groups. Sage Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208956								
Baumgaertner, E. (2023, January 30). Students lost one-third of a school year to pandemic, study finds. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/30/health/covid-education-children.html	X							
Battle, J., & Lewis, M. (2002). The increasing significance of class: The relative effects of race and socioeconomic status on academic achievement. Journal of Poverty, 6(2), 21–35. https://doi.org/10.1300/j134v06n02_02		X		X				
Betthäuser, B. A., Bach-Mortensen, A. M., & Engzell, P. (2023). A systematic review and meta-analysis of the evidence on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nature Human Behaviour, 7(3), 375–385. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01506-4	X							
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APPENDIX I

Introduction Email

10/30/23

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student at University Massachusetts Global, conducting a study exploring K6 educators' perceptions of the impact on low-income students returning to school after being online after the trauma of a pandemic with 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,

Sarah Orendorff

[redacted]

APPENDIX J

IRB Approval to Conduct Research

Sarah Orendorff <sorendor@mail.umassglobal.edu>

IRB Application Approved: Sarah Orendorff

Institutional Review Board <my@umassglobal.edu> Sun, Nov 5, 2023 at 11:50 AM
Reply-To: webmaster@umassglobal.edu
To: sorendor@mail.umassglobal.edu
Cc: dlong@umassglobal.edu, lgoodman@umassglobal.edu, irb@umassglobal.edu

Dear Sarah Orendorff,

Congratulations! Your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the UMass Global Institutional Review Board. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If you need to modify your IRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at IRB.umassglobal.edu

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank You,

IRB
Academic Affairs
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16355 Laguna Canyon Road
Irvine, CA 92618
irb@umassglobal.edu
www.umassglobal.edu

This email is an automated notification. If you have questions please email us at irb@umassglobal.edu.