2024

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS ON SAFETY GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOL ADHERENCE FOR IN-PERSON TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Maria Paros

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS ON SAFETY
GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOL ADHERENCE FOR IN-PERSON TEACHING
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York
by
Maria Paros

Date Submitted March 13, 2024   Date Approved May 17, 2024

_____   _____

Maria Paros   Dr. James Coviello

ABSTRACT

EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS ON

SAFETY GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOL ADHERENCE FOR IN-PERSON

TEACHING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Maria Paros

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a devastating and long-lasting effect on most of the world. In an attempt to slow the spread of the virus, public health authorities instituted guidelines for schools regarding social distancing, mask wearing, and quarantining, and the U.S. educational system was forced to adjust. This phenomenological study examines, from the perception and experiences of primary school teachers, how teachers returned to in-person education while adhering to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fifteen experienced primary teachers in three public school districts across Long Island, New York were involved in the study and participated in interviews and focus groups. This study contributes to the literature on the effects on education during COVID-19 pandemic by providing additional insight into how educators adhered to and followed the safety protocols for students and themselves while teaching in person during the pandemic. Implications from this study offer lessons for teachers, leaders, and policymakers on communication strategies, the importance of being prepared for future situations requiring immediate change, and lessons on future guidelines and regulations to meet the needs of this younger student population.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this momentous accomplishment to my family and friends who have supported me throughout this journey. To my parents, I know this journey has been an uphill battle for all of us. From almost losing one of you to COVID to having the other diagnosed with cancer, I am beyond thankful to God to have you both witness me completing this. Thank you for always encouraging me and helping me accomplish something I never thought possible. To my husband, thank you so much for always believing in me and encouraging me to finish this. You know more than anyone how hard of a journey this was for me and I am grateful to have you by my side through it all. To my daughter, and my future children, thank you for being my why. I hope you can look up to your mom one day and always remember to keep striving for the best and never want to stop learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this moment to thank, from the bottom of my heart, my two amazing mentors throughout my journey, Dr. Katherine Aquino and Dr. James Coviello. Dr. Aquino, thank you for your support during my journey through the first half of this work. Your patience and belief in me is something I will never forget and will always be thankful for. Dr. Coviello, thank you for always being there for me and pushing me to get this done. Your guidance and enthusiasm was greatly appreciated and exactly what was needed for me to complete this during a new phase in my life. Lastly, I would like to thank my dissertation committee members, Dr. Anthony Annunziato, Dr. Rory Manning, Dr. Stephen Kotok, and Dr. Joan Birringer-Haig. Thank you for your readiness to be on my committee and provide me with the feedback that was needed in order to make my dissertation what it is today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has made a lasting and devastating impact on everyone around the world (Kurtz, 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on February 11, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) officially gave the virus a name: COVID 19. Exactly one month later, on March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the virus a pandemic since the virus had affected numerous countries around the world (Wake, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic quickly spread to every part of the world and resulted in an increased global morbidity rate, specifically among the elderly and those with underlying preconditions (Wake, 2020). Data from the CDC show that on March 30, 2020 the total number of people who extracted the virus in the United States alone was 163,139 with a total death count at 2,866. One year later on March 30, 2021, the total number of cases in the United States had drastically increased to 30,147,895 and reported a total of 547,296 deaths. The last known disease that has caused such an extreme global effect dates back to the 1918 Spanish Flu (Omary et al., 2020).

The everyday lives of people have been drastically changed since the outbreak of this virus, regardless of a person's socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location; the virus knew no limits (Viner et al., 2020). Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, mandatory quarantine caused workplaces to shut down, non-essential stores to close their doors, and schools to close indefinitely (Wake, 2020). In addition to quarantining, the CDC suggested people wear a mask, maintain six feet distance from others, and avoid crowded areas in order to stop the spread of the virus (Viner et al., 2020). Living in fear,

people have had to adjust their daily lives in order to adjust to the ever-changing regulations and rules provided by government officials and scientists (Omary et al., 2020).

One of the major community changes to have come out of this pandemic was in regard to the school systems. Mirahmadizadeh et al. (2020) highlight that regardless of involvement--as teachers, school staff members, students, parents, or community members--the impact of the sudden act of closing schools in order to quickly slow down the spread of the virus will ultimately have a long term affect on the mental health of teachers and student academic achievement. Due to the rapid changes occurring, school administrators and educators were forced to create creative ways to connect to the students and parents of the district in a meaningful and productive way, while still meeting state curriculum standards (Anderson, 2020). Teachers and leaders relied on technology in order to reach out to their students to finish off the 2019-2020 school year with some community and academic feel. Anderson (2020) goes on to further mention that many middle to low-income families experienced difficulty during the shut down due to the lack of technology resources as well as difficulty in guiding their children through their academic tasks. Furthermore, the pandemic has also made people aware of not only the lack of devices but also the lack of appropriate Internet access required to attend class and submit assignments in a timely manner.

Although the discrepancies in adequate device and at-home support might be obvious, Kinsey (2020) also highlights other needs that many do not consider in the discussion for students to return to in-person learning. One example is the need for school leadership to find a solution to providing free and reduced lunch to the students who

depend on those meals on a daily basis. Kinsey (2020) further states that households started experiencing job insecurity related to COVID-19, which made the need for accessible school meals even more imperative for school aged students. Viner et al. (2021) state that school closures impact a child's "physical activity and range of impacts on mental health and well-being due to social isolation, reduced social isolation, reduced social support, increase exposure to violence at home…and exclusion of the most vulnerable students from social safety nets operating through schools" (p.111).

The lockdown portion of the pandemic has shown everyone the important role that schools play in a community and in a child's life (Anderson, 2020). The need to open schools became essential for not only the community but also for the students who attend them (Viner et al., 2020). According to a study that Mirahmadizadeh et al. (2020) conducted, it was found that students were not only eager to go back to school for more structured days but also eager for the in-person socialization that they experience with their peers and teachers. With students wanting to come back to school, as well as emerging studies about the importance of schools reopening in the post lockdown pandemic, it was imperative for school leaders to implement a new way of reaching and teaching students with technology, while still providing the same educational opportunities and resources to all students regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds (Anderson, 2020).

In 2020, prior to school openings across the nation, thousands of school districts came forward stating that they will not be opening their doors for in-person learning but instead will continue full time virtual learning. Although many districts were rejecting the

traditional way of teaching for the upcoming school year, 61 percent of districts were still in favor of in-person teaching as well as implementing a hybrid model (Gewertz, 2020).

When in a global pandemic, the first thing that needs to be considered before reopening a school to in-person instruction is the health and safety of the children and staff entering it. Viner et al. (2020) have researched multiple studies that have shown that it is not a big risk to open up schools since the transmission rate through children is minimal and the mortality rate of children who extracted this virus is marginal. With this news from scientists and researchers, and the contrasting studies of the negative effect school closures have had on students, the next steps are to make sure that staff and students are protected when reopening schools (Viner et al., 2020).

The Department of Education (DOE) in New York City (2020) created and posted a reopening plan on their website in the summer of 2020 titled for families and students to be aware of what to expect for the upcoming school year. According to the plan, in order to maintain health and safety measures, districts would be separated into a hybrid, cohort model of learning in which students would be in person for a certain number of days and virtual for the other days. The main goal of this plan was to create smaller class sizes for social distancing. It also stated that families have the ability to choose not to send their children to school, which would require students to continue full-time virtual instruction with the ability to return to the hybrid cohort model of learning during a given time period. While in-person, students must wear a mask, maintain a six-feet social distance at all times. Furthermore, constant cleaning and disinfecting of contaminated surfaces, and washing hands must take place whenever necessary.

Similar to the Department of Education in New York City, other areas of New York, including the Long Island school districts, were planning their return to the new school year. The governor of New York during the time of the initial pandemic outbreak, Governor Andrew Cuomo, allowed for school districts across the state to open up but only with strict guidance from the New York State Department of Health. Similar to the city, the New York State Department of Health required school districts on Long Island returning to in-person learning to have a mask mandate, g, enforce social distancing, complete daily temperature/health screenings, and clean and disinfect all in-use surfaces. With the school systems in New York, and nationally, entering a post lockdown pandemic, school districts preparing for upcoming school years are now in a position to not only implement the new health and safety guidelines and protocols but also to keep up to date on the constant changes that are evolving with these safety guidelines (Najarro, 2021). Teachers are now faced with not only teaching the curriculum and supporting students and families, but also adjusting to the changing protocols (Will, 2021). Will (2021) further goes on to state that this added pressure has caused teachers to experience burnout much faster than in years past, with some teachers even resigning or retiring earlier than expected.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore the perception and experiences of teachers supporting in-person education while adhering to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic had changed the daily life of every person in the world, school districts included. Schools were required to follow the health and safety regulations put out by the state as well as the

CDC guidelines. The CDC guidelines were the main source for school staff to maintain updated classroom safety and health procedures and protocols.

Aside from the CDC's three main requirements of wearing a mask, social distancing, and avoiding crowds, schools also require students to wash their hands throughout the school day in order to mitigate the spread of the virus throughout the school day. Additionally, schools are made to monitor and report infections among students and teachers to the state in order to track the effectiveness of maintaining the health and safety of the school community during in-person learning (Viner et al., 2020). The CDC website had resources and tools to use when returning back into the school environment. Resources included printable posters to put around the school, as well as cleaning and disinfecting checklists.

With the stress of trying to figure out how to teach primary school-aged students during a typical school year, questions naturally arose in regard to this new and unique school year. By understanding the physical and emotional experiences of teachers who not only taught but also adapted to emerging and frequently changing CDC guidelines, administrators and policymakers can mediate future issues that might occur in the event of additional school closings, transitions to virtual learning, and other unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, the goal of better understanding the experiences of teachers will also give insight into how students process and deal with being in school during a pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks that will frame this study are Edgar H. Schein's culture theory (2004) and Kurt Lewin's change theory (1940).

Culture Theory

Schein (2004) defines culture as "both dynamic phenomenon that surround us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior, and a set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior" (p. 1). To further explain the theory, Schein (2004) organizes culture into three separate levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions.

This theory is an important part of the current study since it allows for a better understanding of why school districts made the decisions they did when faced with the current COVID-19 global pandemic. Furthermore, it allows for a better understanding of how those decisions affected the culture of the district as a whole.

Figure 1

Three Levels of Culture (Schein)
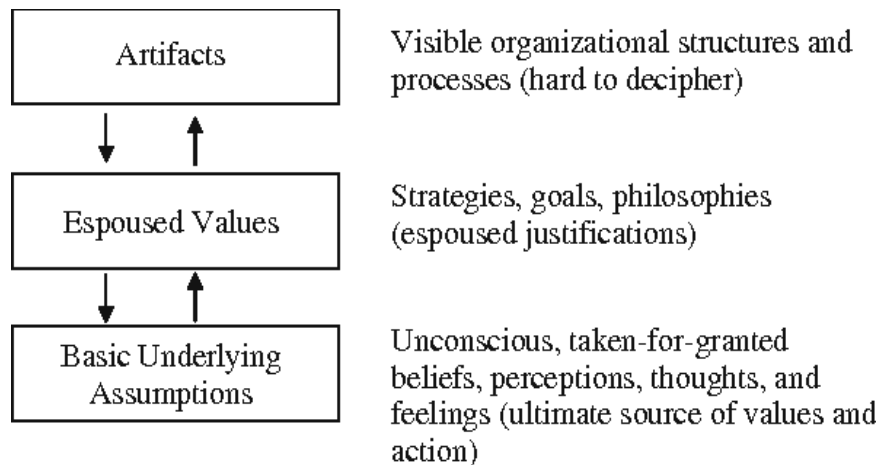
Note. The figure describes the levels of culture within an organization.

Change Theory

Lewin (1940) explained that change is possible within an organization but it needs to be done in a meaningful and calculated way in order to be successful. To better understand his Change Management Model, Lewin (1940) created three stages: unfreeze, change, and refreeze.

This theory is an essential part of the current study since change has been essential in being able to survive the COVID 19 pandemic. Being able to change the previous way of thought about how to run a school district is important in relation to the current CDC regulations and guidelines that are managing many important health and safety decisions.

Figure 2

Change Theory (Lewin)
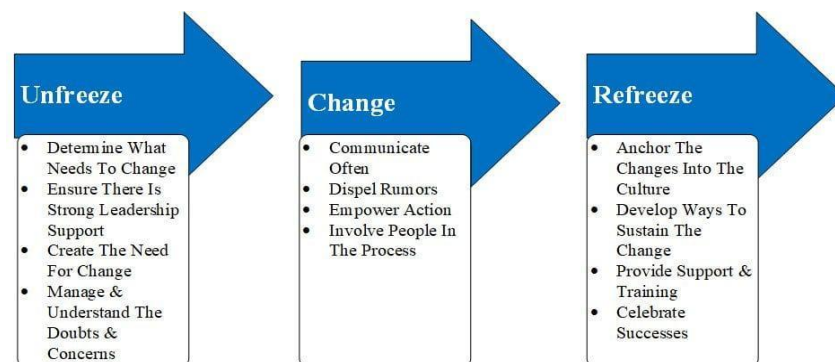
Note. The figure describes effective ways to implement change in a leadership position.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to give further insight into how educators adhered to and followed the safety protocols for students and themselves while teaching

in person during a pandemic. Teaching during a pandemic was something that no one has ever done before since the Spanish Flu in 1918 (Omary et al., 2020). Recent studies have shown that with the additional responsibilities and stress put upon educators, teacher burnout has recently reached a new high (Will, 2021). Due to this rise in stress, research and discussion has shifted to focus more on self-care strategies for staff (Heubeck, 2021). Although studies have been conducted on the additional stress teachers are under, as well as strategies to combat the new stress, this specific study focused on the responses of schools and the experiences of teachers during that response period. Gaining insight into this will allow for smoother transitions to change in future years when change is necessary. Furthermore, knowing what the teachers are going through will reflect on how the students are doing through the pandemic while in school.

This study provided an understanding of what teachers are going through while teaching students in person with the CDC guidelines front and center. The data gathered through the study suggests areas for improvement within primary school buildings in order to better support teachers throughout a challenging year of change and evolving teaching expectations and responsibilities. Stakeholders--administrators, parents, teachers, and community leaders--will benefit from a different perspective on the importance of supporting teachers so that they can better support their students.

Research Questions

1. What are teachers' perceptions and experiences with in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How do teachers understand and implement federal and district-specific guidelines, CDC guidelines, and safety protocols within their classroom environment throughout the post lockdown period?

3. How have teachers responded to the shifting CDC guidelines for daily classroom routines and safety protocols throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

Definition of Key Terminology

CDC Regulations/Guidelines- The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has put specific regulations and guidelines in place which schools must adhere to in order to put the health and safety of staff and students first while teaching in person. These regulations and guidelines can be found on the CDC website. Frequent visits to the website are necessary in order to stay informed about   changing information related to COVID-19. .

COVID 19- According to the CDC, Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in December 2019. COVID-19 is a new virus that scientists and doctors are learning about as it develops. . It causes mild to severe symptoms in people and in some cases even death. This virus, which originated in Wuhan, China, has now spread throughout the entire world, affecting everyday lives.

In-Person Teaching- For the purpose of this study, in-person teaching is defined as teaching that takes place with students in a physical classroom. Intertwined with the process of in-person teaching is the simultaneous implementation of health and safety regulations and guidelines from scientists, healthcare specialists, and government officials.

Pandemic- An epidemic is when a disease spreads more than what is expected. This becomes a pandemic when an epidemic is recorded in multiple countries (Jones & Nahal, 2020).

Primary School- For the purpose of this study, primary school refers to public school students who are in Kindergarten through 2nd grade.

CHAPTER 2

Introduction

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to examine the perception and experiences of teachers supporting in-person education while adhering to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter first focuses on the theoretical framework that supports this study. There are two frameworks that are used as a guide for this study: culture (Schein, 2017) and change (Lewin, 1940). These two frameworks will allow for a better understanding of how the culture of a school building is affected due to the extreme change that is occurring. An explanation of how these frameworks work in the present student will also be discussed in this section.

After exploring the two frameworks, the key points on the background of the COVID-19 virus as well as its effect on the primary school environment are explored. In order to understand the effect that COVID-19 has had on primary school teachers, it is important to understand the origins of the virus as well as the impact of changes in primary schools.

Lastly, the literature review explores teaching experiences and perceptions prior to CDC guidelines, protocols, and restrictions. The main points that will be focused on in this study are the following: safe and clean classroom environment, student engagement, primary student use of classroom, and the importance of socialization skills. Primary school teachers, prior to the restrictions of COVID-19, had different expectations and focuses during the school day. The studies that will be explored in this section will provide further evidence on how important skills that are typically learned during primary school years are now affected due to the CDC guidelines and protocols.

Theoretical Frameworks

The two theoretical frameworks that will frame this study are Edgar H. Schein's culture theory (2004) and Kurt Lewin's change theory (1940).

Schein's Culture Framework

Schein (2004) organized his cultural framework into three separate levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions.

The artifacts of a culture are the objects and beliefs that organizations have readily available for everyone to see and know but sometimes may be difficult to understand completely for those who are not a part of that culture for an extended period of time (Shein, 2004). Such artifacts include, but are not limited to, the physical building and upkeep of an institution, the use of technology, the messages the organization conveys to the public, and the hearsay by the public. Within a school district, artifacts would include the mission statement, the chain of commands within leadership, student work displayed within a building, the upkeep of school grounds and office buildings, the cleanliness inside a building, and comments made from the staff and parents.

Espoused beliefs and values are an integral part of an organization's culture, as they include the thought processes and responses to situations that arise from the people who form and operate within the organization. By looking at artifacts, one could assume what the espoused beliefs and values are within an organization due to the decisions that were made. However, it is not always the case that artifacts align with the espoused beliefs and values of the organization as a whole. This inconsistency occurs when institutions have aspirations but are unable to fully fulfill them due to a lack of leadership or knowledge. Within a school district, an espoused belief and value could be a district's response to an

issue that arises, how effectively a district follows its mission statement, and how it adheres to public promises it makes to the community or to a group of people.

Some espoused beliefs and values have been used to solve situations that arise in an organization and ultimately turn into the next level of culture, basic underlying assumptions. The basic underlying assumptions are the core of an organization's culture. It is something that long-term employees know all about, and new employees will come to understand after a period of time working in the organization. Basic underlying assumptions are so ingrained into an organization's culture that it is hard, sometimes impossible, to change or alter them. Within a school district, a basic underlying assumption would typically come from a strong and effective administrator. A basic underlying assumption could be putting students' safety and well being first, as well as having input from stakeholders before making a decision.

In the current study, the culture of the primary school building is important in understanding the transition into in-person learning during a global pandemic. If the culture of a building is not positive and receptive to change, then the process of teaching in person, with the added pressures of the CDC guidelines and regulations, will not be a successful process. To further identify if a school will be effective in teaching in person with the added CDC guidelines and regulations, one can look at the three levels of culture that Schein outlined to predict how effective the return to in-person teaching will be amid a global pandemic. Furthermore, the culture of a building could affect a teacher's perception of all the changes that are happening at such a rapid pace.

Lewin's Change Model

Lewin (1940) explained that change is possible within an organization but it needs to be done in a meaningful and calculated way in order to be successful. To better understand his Change Management Model, Lewin (1940) created three stages: unfreeze, change, and refreeze.

The first stage, unfreeze, is the process that needs to occur before change can even be thought about. In this stage, organizational leaders need to be able to explain to stakeholders the need for change, the "why." Without this step, leaders will find it hard to establish buy-in from stakeholders and will ultimately find resistance to the change that is needed to better the organization. It is important to have a plan in place that also reassures stakeholders that their voice matters within the process. Within a school district, an example of this would be for building leaders to explain to staff the importance of changing something as simple as the dismissal process that has become status quo throughout the years.

Once leaders are able to articulate the importance of change within the organization, the next step would be to develop a plan that allows collaboration between all those who are involved in the change. The most important part of this stage is to make sure the leadership allows for time and constant communication to ensure that the change will be effective. It is also important to keep in mind that not everyone in the organization will be on board with the change that is occurring. If this is the case, it is essential to try and involve those people in the change in order for effective communication and collaboration to occur. Within a school district, a leader would create committees and meetings and invite those who will be affected by the change.

The last step in the model is Freeze. In this final stage, once the leadership sees that the changes are in place and going smoothly, the change will become part of the institution's routine. It is up to the leaders to finalize the change by managing the change and supporting stakeholders if they are having difficulty with the change. Within a district, this may involve a building principal monitoring the new dismissal process and being visible during the process throughout the school year in order to intervene if a problem arises.

In the current study, change is a necessary process that needs to take place in order to adjust to the changing CDC guidelines and regulations. Although this change is not optional, it is important to understand the process of creating a change that is going to affect everyone in a school building. Once the CDC put out the necessary steps and protocols that needed to be in place in order for schools to reopen, schools were faced with an overwhelming amount of change. . These changes began with building and district leaders and continued down to individual teachers and students within the classroom. The process of change presented by Lewin is a great way to structure the change that took place within every school building post lockdown to better understand the changes in schools.

Background on COVID 19

The world has witnessed many historical events that have affected the course of time, including world wars, pandemics, and epidemics. The most recent impact on the world's history is the current pandemic known as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). According to Thakar (2020), "In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China on December

31, 2019" (p. 2). After its initial emergence in China, the virus spread to other countries around the world, such as South Korea, Italy, Iran, Japan, and the United States of America and would ultimately spread to every country, affecting millions of people (Thakar, 2020). The WHO "declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern in late January 2020, and a pandemic in March 2020" (Ayenigbara et al., 2020, p.219).

In an attempt to rapidly slow down the spread of the virus, many countries, and states in the United States, were forced to implement a complete lockdown. This type of lockdown required people to stay in their homes and not leave except for essential workers going to work and for people to shop for essential needs. The lockdown ultimately caused schools from kindergarten through 12th grade to close down (Phelps & Sperry, 2020), making it "one of the largest disruptions of the education system in history" (Sunita, 2020, p. 193). These school closings placed pressure on districts to come up with a plan in order to continue to provide virtual academic instruction and support for the remainder of the school year. With the last minute attempt to create new ways of teaching, there were many flaws that came to light with the plan. Sunita (2020) recorded economic and social issues such as "student debt, barriers to digital learning, food insecurity, and risk of homelessness" (p. 193). Furthermore, the mental health of students and staff were not taken into consideration and few resources were provided to support students and staff as they worked through abrupt academic, emotional, and social shifts during the initial stages of remote learning. (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

Although state-mandated lockdowns changed the way people lived their daily lives and virtual learning presented its own challenges, this change presented

advantageous changes to the health and safety of the people worldwide. The virus

continued to infect people with preexisting health conditions as well as healthy

individuals at a rapid rate, even with the lockdown in place. As of July 6th, 2020, there

have been over 11.4 million confirmed cases and over 533,780 deaths due to COVID-19

(Ayenigbara et al., 2020). Healthcare professionals needed to learn ways to reduce the

rapidly growing number of positive cases and government officials needed to revise and

fine-tune lockdown strategies. "Until a vaccine or effective treatment becomes available,

public behavior and adherence to national and sub-national response strategies will

continue to be key measures for controlling the virus" (Habbersaat et. al, 2020).

While waiting for a vaccine to be created, health officials found it beneficial to

educate the public on the virus and why it spread so quickly. After many studies, experts

found that COVID-19 is transmitted mainly through "close contact at distance below

approximately 1-2 meters with infected humans via saliva and liquid products from a

patient, and through a patient's sneezes, talks and coughs" (Ayenigbara et al., 2020, p.

219). Furthermore, this virus is so contagious that a person can become infected when

making contact with a contaminated surface and then, without proper hand washing,

touch his or her mouth, nose, and eyes (Ayenigbara et al., 2020).

This new knowledge of how the virus spreads from person to person made it even

more imperative to not only have health professionals educate the public on how the virus

spreads but also how to prevent the spread in the meantime. Six main meditative

measures were designed for the prevention and control of COVID-19: "thorough hand

washing with soap and running water and usage of alcohol hand sanitizer, frequent

surface cleaning, strict adherence to social distancing, respiratory hygiene, wearing of

protective face mask, and testing, self-isolation, quarantine and rigorous contact tracing"
(Ayenigbara et al., 2020). The CDC put out these measures for the public to strictly
adhere to as professionals created a vaccine as well as a potential cure. With the fear of
another wave of a drastic increase in positive cases, these six measures have been the
basis of peoples' daily lives since they were created. Similarly, school districts have also
adopted and adhered to their own set of rules and protocols in order to reopen for the
upcoming school year.

Impact of COVID-19 on Primary School Environments

According to Sunita (2020), many countries had already re-opened their schools
and figured out ways to implement a safe learning environment for both students and
staff before the United States reinstated in-person learning after the lockdown. Parts of
the six main meditative measures were followed by some countries but not by all.

Levinson et al. (2020) noted that in the Netherlands, their school doors have been
opened since April and school administrators have restructured classroom environments
to ensure class sizes were cut in half. They have also yet to enforce social distancing
measures or mask wearing for students younger than 12 years of age. The Netherlands
saw much success with this approach and ultimately "returned to full capacity and full
day teaching in early June. Though both staff and children who are high-risk or have
high-risk family members have been exempted from returning to school in person, most
children and educators have returned and the case rate has thus far remained flat"
(Levinson et al., 2020, p. 298).

Similar successful openings in primary school buildings around the world can be
seen in Finland, Belgium, Austria, Taiwan, Singapore, France, New Zealand, and

Denmark (Levinson et al., 2020). It is worth noting that all of these countries took the necessary precautions prior to opening their doors. Some countries, such as Israel, did not take necessary precautions such as social distancing and were forced to close schools after the number of positive cases continued to increase (Levinson et al., 2020).

The United States has a unique vantage point in its ability to see the success of some countries' efforts as well as the ineffective measures to protect the student and staff population in other countries. Superintendents across the United States are now left to decide what to do in regard to the upcoming school year with guidance from state officials, the CDC, and healthcare professionals. Rubin (2020) interviewed superintendents during the summer of 2020 to see what their approach might be for the new school year and received answers of "there are no good options for next year; there is no scenario in the fall that doesn't break your heart" (p. 534).

While health and safety have to be the priority in the minds of those deciding the plan for the school year, it is also important to keep in mind how school is more than just a place for student academics. Rubin (2020) explained, "School might be their only stable environment, the place where they receive so-called wraparound services such as free meals and health care" (Rubin, 2020, p. 534). Without schools, students lose out on many developmental milestones in their social, emotional, and academic abilities. Rubin (2020) further goes on to state "school closures have made it difficult for schools to identify and address important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation" (p.534). It is apparent that schools have become a necessary part of our culture and our way of life. Children need to be in school; depending on their home situation, some children need to be in school more

than others (Rubin, 2020). "Primary schools are essential- more like grocery stores, doctors' offices, and food manufacturers" (Levinson et al., 2020).

Ultimately, every district was left to decide which approach works best for its population of students and community. Although there are many approaches to this problem, "educationalists have adopted shift systems, physical distancing, and hygienic protocols wherever students are being allowed to physically return to school, or alternatively, they are adapting remote modalities of education" (Sunita, 2020, p. 193).

Primary School Classroom Environment

Best Practices For A Safe And Clean Classroom Environment

Most primary school-aged children spend at least 30 hours a week within a school building (Robinson et al., 2015). Due to the high number of hours that children spend within the school building, it is imperative that every measure is taken in order to maintain a safe and clean environment (Robinson et al., 2015).

COVID-19 is not the first airborne infectious disease or health concern that has been addressed within the school environment (Azimi et al, 2020). From measles, to Ebola virus, to asthma, schools have received directives from the CDC in order to make sure that children and staff are safe and healthy within school buildings (Robinson et al., 2015).

When Ebola was a concern around the world, the CDC provided guidance and protocols for schools to follow if anyone came in close contact with someone who was infected (Benjamin, 2014). Similar to the COVID-19 guidelines, the CDC provided the following recommendations for schools to prevent the spread of the disease:

Encouraging students and staff to stay home and visit a physician if sick, promotion good hand hygiene to students and stocking restrooms with soap and paper towel, regularly cleaning and dissecting classrooms, sharing messages about infectious disease prevention tactics in daily announcements, training staff members to handle food as well as bodily fluids and excretions in a safe manner, and encouraging students and staff to get annual flu shots. (Benjamin, 2014, p. 4)

Although Ebola did not close down schools or make as big of an impact as COVID-19, it is important to note the preventative measures that were used in order to keep schools safe and healthy. Furthermore, it may be useful to revisit the policies that have been in place prior to the Ebola outbreak (Benjamin, 2014). Benjamin (2014) warns readers that school districts need to start "planning ahead, instead of scrambling in a time of crisis…it is education's best chance for preventing and dealing with an outbreak of any kind" (p. 5). What Benjamin warned readers of in 2014 is the reality we faced with the COVID outbreak just six years later.

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the primary classroom environment with the new health and safety regulations that need to be followed according to CDC regulations (Hallas et al., 2020). Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, frequent hand washing, mask-wearing throughout the day, social distancing at least six feet, putting up borders, and not using any shared materials is the new reality that schools are implementing on a daily basis (Hallas et al., 2020).

Although previous practices for a safe and clean classroom environment were suggested, there has been no follow-through with how these measures are implemented. Instead, these measures functioned as honor-system suggestions for staff to follow if in

fact there was a need (Benjamin, 2014). In order to be certain that districts were following through with the regulations and protocols, school nurses had to take a leadership role in assuring that their buildings were running safely and appropriately in regard to CDC guidelines and protocols (Hallas et al., 2020).

Teacher and Student Relationship in Relation to Student Engagement

There are many ways that have been implemented to measure student engagement during structured lessons (Carter et al., 2012). Some methods of measurement include teacher-report, observational measures, and student self-report (Carter et al., 2012). Regardless of the measurement being used, one factor is consistent: student engagement is a well-researched topic due to the positive effect it has on student achievement (Gupta et al., 2020).

One of the most common ways to measure student engagement is to take a deeper dive into the teacher and student relationship (Alexander, 2009). Teachers and students spend over 1,000 hours together during a typical school year (Sparks, 2019). This relationship has been one of the major factors in determining positive student engagement (Alexander, 2009). Without a positive relationship between the teacher and student, it is more difficult to sustain the attention of a student during a lesson (Roorda et al., 2017). Children as young as kindergarten and as old as high school seniors are affected by this relationship (Roorda et al., 2017). Trust, compassion, dependency, empathy, and transparency are all components that are needed in order to gain and sustain a positive teacher and student relationship, which in turn will improve student engagement as well as student achievement (Sparks, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017; Birch, 1998;). With the known importance of creating a successful teacher-student relationship in order to engage

students, it should be one of the top priorities of teachers to create such a positive relationship (Birch, 1998). Teachers need to make sure that they make a deep connection with their students by showing respect for them and their culture, and making them feel valued within the classroom (Sparks, 2019).

With such emphasis on making sure teachers virtually connect with students in order to maintain student engagement, the challenge that arises is how to go about this with the CDC health and safety protocols and regulations. Sparks (2022) looked into the effect of the increase of screen time since the lockdown and student behavior within the classroom. Screen time in children between ages 8 to 12 has increased from 50 minutes per day to 5 hours and 33 minutes per day, not including screen time in the classroom (Sparks, 2022). With this dramatic increase, teachers have noted a major shift in student behavior within the classroom (Sparks, 2022). This has ultimately affected the teacher and student relationship in a negative way.

Furthermore, transitioning back to in-person learning posed its own problem in regard to the teacher and student relationship (Herold, 2022). Herold (2022) noted that 92% of teachers felt as though their jobs have become more stressful post-lockdown. This increase in teacher stress can impact the priority of a teacher to make those essential connections with students (Herold, 2022). In a conversation that Herold (2022) had with a New Jersey principal, the principal mentioned how hard it was post-lockdown in his building since he "watched masked teenagers marching silently in single-file lines down the school's one-way hallways, unsure how to connect with their friends in the somber new environment" (p. 13). As student and staff health and safety remain a top priority, prior practices start to suffer which causes a snowball effect of issues that were once

never an issue (Sparks, 2022). Ultimately, once the teacher and student relationship get interrupted, student engagement will also decrease (Sparks, 2022).

Classroom Structure in Primary School

A primary classroom is strategically developed and organized by the teacher based on child development as well as key socialization opportunities and optimal placement for student learning (Shahli et al., 2020). Shahli et al. (2020) developed a classroom layout that is divided into five main sections: entrance, learning area, playing area, kitchen, and toilet. Shahli et al. (2020) further explained how each of these areas are specifically designed to provide "the elements of welcoming, comfortable, safety and security to foster engagement of children with the learning environment" (p. 2). The main areas in a primary classroom that are going to be focused on for this section of the literature review are the classroom rug, flexible seating, and the play area.

A main focal point of any primary school classroom is the classroom rug. The rug provides many developmental occasions for students, one of them being circle time (Yifat, 2008). During circle time, which consists of controlled and structured setting, children work on appropriate social interactions, cognitive skills, language development, and emotional skills (Yifat, 2008). Yifat (2008) stated that circle time could go in many directions depending on what the teacher decides to focus during that instructional period. Aside from circle time, the classroom rug is where the classroom library can be found, which is where countless books are available for children to look through (Martinez et al., 1988). Providing children with meaningful texts that they can voluntarily select allows for children to increase their literacy skills (Martinez et al., 1988). Furthermore, many teachers provide pivotal whole group instruction while children are

gathered on the rug (Donaldson, 2020). This practice of teaching while children are on the rug allows for students to collaborate with each other as well as maintain their attention and engagement (Donaldson, 2020). Overall, the classroom rug has multiple purposes but one thing stays the same: it is a place where learning and cultivating takes place during the school day.

Another more recent addition to a primary school classroom is flexible seating (Klein, 2020). Klein (2020) described flexible seating as a variety of seat choices that students can choose to learn in rather than at a traditional desk. Any seat choice could be considered flexible seating: rocking chairs, stability balls, wobbly stools, bean bag chairs, and scoop stools. Even having students standing while leaning on an elevated desk or laying on the rug constitutes flexible seating (Klein, 2020). Klein (2020) further explained that this new trend in flexible seating is based on making "the students feel more comfortable, to create more opportunities for them to collaborate with peers, and perhaps, to get them more involved in their learning" as well as increasing a sense of classroom community which will in turn increase student engagement (p. 3).

Arguably the most important part for children's' development in a primary classroom is the play area (Pyle et al., 2014). Through imaginary and cooperative play, children develop their language skills through the vocabulary words they use while playing, improve their academic skills by implementing what they learned into their play, and cultivate their social and emotional skills while working with peers towards a common goal (Pyle et al., 2014).

Although play is an important part of the primary school experience, the legislative decision to enact "No Children Left Behind" impacted the role of play in the

primary classroom. Much of the playtime that once structured the day transitioned into academic instruction that met legislative demands. (Cavanugh et al., 2016). Needless to say, the academic success of the students who did not engage in play were lower than those who did, the emotional and social skills suffered long term, and students were not as engaged in the school experience as those students who had those experiences early in their school aged years (Cavanugh et al., 2016).

Once schools reopened due to the lockdown, many of these important aspects of a primary school classroom had been taken away in order to comply with the CDC health and safety protocols and guidance (Schwartz, 2020).

Importance Of Student Socialization Skill Development

Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten* examines life lessons that are taught to young children through socialization experiences. Fulghum (2003) highlights some of the main lessons that he took with him from kindergarten: "share everything, play fair, don't hit people, put things back where you found them, and clean up your own mess" (2). Without the ability to socialize in a structured environment appropriately, these life long lessons that Fulghum touches upon, during such an impressionable time of someone's life, cannot be learned (Chen et al., 2020).

Primary school plays a pivotal role in a child's academic future (Hernández et al., 2016). Hernández et al., (2016) found that the primary grade level is the first time that a child is exposed to routines, rules, procedures, structure, and a new way of viewing the world around them, all while surrounded by peers their age. Positive experiences while in the primary grades have proven to have a long-lasting effect on students in their future

academic careers (Hernández et al., 2016). Furthermore, this age range is a time when children can improve their socialization skills and cognitive skills in order to be higher-level thinking adults who are able to work collaboratively with others (Adıgüzel et al., 2017).

Adıgüzel et al., (2017) conducted a study in which they found that primary teachers value play and socialization time more than instructional time with students due to the major impact play and socialization have on the child's long-term development. It is important for teachers to use socialization time with students by modeling appropriate behaviors so that children know how to regulate their emotions and thought processes (Denham et al., 2017). Additionally, the study showed that schools have an obligation to teach and help children learn how to comply with social norms regardless of the setting. In his study on the long-lasting importance of socialization at a young age, Lignier (2017) argued, "children learn fundamental schemes of division and hierarchy in early socialization in families and schools" (Lignier, 2017, p. 575).

With studies proving the positive effects of appropriate socialization in primary-aged children, coupled with teacher agreement, it comes as no surprise that the American Academy of Pediatrics has also voiced its stance on child socialization. Hinton (2016) investigated Rhode Island's process of mandating daily school recess for 20 consecutive minutes from grades kindergarten through sixth. The law cited the American Academy of Pediatrics and detailed how play and socialization are crucial components of a child's development (Hinton, 2016). Hinton (2016) even stated "the law recognizes recess as a right for students…and asks teachers to make a good faith effort not to take away recess as a form of punishment and allows schools to treat recess as instructional time" (p. 4).

Conclusion

The present study fits with the previous scholarships that have been researched. Previous studies have looked into the prior diseases that have affected the classroom environment and the measures taken to help ensure a safe and healthy environment for students and staff. Additionally, previous studies have examined the importance of primary school years for children's' development prior to any mandatory guidance and regulations that were placed on administrators and teachers by the CDC. This current study seeks to fill gaps in the literature through its examination of the COVID-19 virus that is currently around the world, the effect of CDC guidelines and regulations on the primary school classroom environment, and how teachers are currently altering their set routines in order to meet the changing guidelines and regulations mandated by the CDC.

The success of schools reopening during a pandemic is dependent on how effectively administration and staff can follow and maintain the CDC guidance and protocols (Hallas et al., 2020). Following the CDC guidance and protocols, alongside keeping up with teaching state standards, is something that current teachers have never done before. It is important to study this new and current phenomenon in order to better plan for any future outbreaks and seek potential improvements that will allow educators to better adjust to unexpected changes that may occur in the future.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has changed the dynamics of teaching in a primary school classroom (Omary et al., 2020). With new information coming out about the COVID-19 virus on a weekly basis, the CDC guidelines are the main source for school staff to maintain updated classroom safety and health procedures and protocols. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the perception and experiences of teachers who support in-person education and simultaneously adhere to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 1 of this study reviewed the background of COVID-19, the effect it had on public school districts when the lockdown first occurred, and the importance of reopening the schools for in-person learning. The chapter also reviewed the safety guidelines and protocols that were implemented by the CDC in order to support a safe and successful reopening of in-person learning in schools. This information is important for the current study since it gives a coherent analysis of what teaching and the classroom environment was like prior to the pandemic.

Chapter 2 of the study examined the importance of in-person learning in school districts prior to the lockdown. Schools, especially primary schools, provide impactful and lifelong lessons for children. Studies have shown that skills such as peer socialization, observation of classroom procedures, and adherence to basic structured schedules are all important for children to learn early on in their lives. The chapter further goes into how COVID-19 has impacted the classroom dynamic post-lockdown as well as a more in-depth analysis of COVID-19.

This current chapter will review the methodological design and procedures of the study. More specifically, the following subsections will elaborate further on the following: the setting of the research, participants, data collection procedures, trustworthiness of the research design, research ethics, data analysis approach, and the researcher's role in this study.

Methods and Procedures

Research Questions

The following three research questions will be examined throughout the study:

1.   What are teachers' perceptions and experiences with in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.   How do teachers understand and implement federal and district-specific guidelines, CDC guidelines, and safety protocols within their classroom environment throughout the post lockdown period?

3.   How have teachers responded to the shifting CDC guidelines for daily classroom routines and safety protocols throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

Setting

A phenomenological study is a study designed to find a common factor, or phenomenon, that is occurring in the experiences of a group of people (Creswell, 2013). By doing this, the researcher is able to document teacher experiences in a phenomenon (in this study, COVID-19), and explore a deeper meaning of the topic of study. Due to the nature of this study, the setting was three primary or elementary public school districts across Long Island, New York. The researcher contacted each voluntary participant prior to conducting interviews and research.

Three suburban public school districts on Long Island were selected and interviews were conducted with active teachers in these primary schools. One of the three school districts chosen (District A) was recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the United States Department of Education. The district also had a primary school, separate from the elementary school, which had 545 students enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year (NYSED Data Site, 2018). The primary school in District A is composed of the following student body: 3% Black/African American; 16% Hispanic/Latino; 73% White; 5% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; and 3% Multiracial (NYSED Data Site, 2018). The student population also includes 12% that are economically disadvantaged; 15% that are classified as students with disabilities; and 6% that are classified as English Language Learners (NYSED Data Site, 2018).

The second of the three school districts (District B) was also recognized as National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the United States Department of Education. Interviewed teachers taught in the elementary school, which began with kindergarten and continued through fifth grade. 48% of the buildings included grades at the primary level (NYSED Data Site, 2018). There were 227 students enrolled in the elementary school during the 2019-2020 school year. The elementary school is composed of the following student body: 3% Black/African American; 7% Hispanic/Latino; 89% White; 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; and 0% Multiracial (NYSED Data Site, 2018). The student population also included 15% that are economically disadvantaged and 26% that are classified as students with disabilities (NYSED Data Site, 2018).

The third school district (District C) was a public school district located in the suburbs of Long Island, New York. For the purpose of this study, the teachers being interviewed teach in an elementary school which means that grades kindergarten through fifth grade are taught in the school building; 45% of the building is primary level (NYSED Data Site, 2018). There were 304 students enrolled in the elementary school during the 2019-2020 school year. The elementary school is composed of the following student body: 1% Black/African American; 8% Hispanic/Latino; 88% White; 1% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; and 2% Multiracial (NYSED Data Site, 2018). The student population also includes 7% that are economically disadvantaged and 14% that are classified as students with disabilities (NYSED Data Site, 2018).

Participants

A true phenomenological study has anywhere from 5 to 25 participants who have all experienced the phenomenon being studied (Polkinghorne, 1989). For this phenomenological study, there were 15 primary public school teachers who took part. The 15 teachers were spread out between three public school districts across Long Island, New York. Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

Participants for the current study were selected based on the following criteria: currently teaching in a primary grade level, must be teaching within a classroom setting, had actively taught prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and must be currently teaching in a public school. In order to develop a more comprehensive data collection, these criteria must be met with every participant. It was imperative for the participants to have known how teaching in a classroom was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to understand the full effect of the recent implementations of CDC regulations. In order to recruit

participants, the researcher contacted primary school teachers who fit the criteria. The

researcher gathered additional participants through a snowball or chain sampling in order

to recruit additional teachers from other districts. This type of sampling allowed for

current participants to bring in other participants who would provide rich information for

the current research (Creswell, 2013). A letter was emailed to the voluntary participants

explaining the research being conducted, a letter from the University, and research

consent forms. Once the participants agreed to the research being conducted and

completed their consent forms, individual interviews were scheduled and took place

through WebEx or through phone interviews.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Participant	Occupation Title	Age	District	Years Teaching
Christina	Kindergarten Teacher	36	A	15
James	Kindergarten Teacher	45	A	22
Olivia	Kindergarten Teacher	31	A	10
David	First Grade Teacher	34	A	12
Alex	First Grade Teacher	30	A	8
Thomas	Second Grade Teacher	40	A	18
Sarah	Kindergarten Teacher	26	B	5
Matthew	First Grade Teacher	34	B	10
John	Second Grade Teacher	42	B	20
Anna	Kindergarten Teacher	35	C	13
Dina	Kindergarten Teacher	27	C	4
Emma	First Grade Teacher	41	C	17
Emily	First Grade Teacher	37	C	15
Laura	Second Grade Teacher	39	C	17
Kathy	Second Grade Teacher	35	C	11

Data Collection Procedures

        The first step was to receive approval from the St. John's University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once approval was received from the IRB, the researcher contacted primary school teachers who met the research criteria to gauge interest in participating in the study. Once the researcher received verbal interest from the teachers, the researcher emailed the three building administrators in order to get their permission to conduct the study with teachers within in their school buildings. After permission was received from the building administrators, each participant signed consent forms to participate in the study. The participants were informed that the data collected would be used solely for dissertation purposes and all identities would remain confidential. For this research, there were three forms of data collection: focus groups, individual interviews, and artifacts obtained from district websites and building leaders.

Focus Groups

        The first step in collecting data was to organize focus groups. There were two focus groups. Both focus groups included participants from all three districts and each focus group contained five participants. These focus groups were used in order for the participants to have authentic back-and-forth conversations in regard to the phenomenon that they experienced. Participants from different districts allowed participants to compare their experiences. The focus groups took place virtually on a WebEx platform and were recorded for the researcher's future reference. The researcher's role during this portion of the data collection was to facilitate the conversation and ask the predetermined questions to guide conversations. The researcher did not add any opinions or ideas to the discussion in order to not influence or solicit any responses from the participants.

The questions asked within the focus group were intentionally broad, general, and open-ended in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the common experiences of the participants from the different districts (Moustakas, 1994). Questions such as "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?" and "What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" were asked during the focus group sessions.

Table 2

Focus Group Question Alignment

Focus Group Question	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
How has it been to teach in-person post-lockdown from COVID-19?	x		x
Any specific challenges that you have noted through these past few years since teaching post lockdown?	x	x	x
What are the major differences you have noted in your classroom from the in-person teaching pre-lockdown to now post-lockdown?		x	x
What type of training and/or preparation has your building provided in regards to communicating the CDC COVID-19 safety/health regulations and protocols?		x	x
How have you changed your classroom procedures in order to meet the needs of the CDC guidelines?	x	x	x

Do you feel as though there is something more you could be doing in order to meet the safety and health guidelines from the CDC?	x	x	x
Do the changing CDC health and safety regulations affect the way you run your classroom on a daily?	x		x
Is there anyone in your building that you can go to as a source of support in order to ensure that you are following the CDC regulations and protocols accurately?		x	x
Has the culture in your building changed since the lockdown?	x		x

Interviews

After the collection of data from the focus group, the researcher compiled interview questions in order to further understand the individual experiences that the participants went through while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews included participants from all three districts; five participants who did not participate in the focus groups. There will be different participants from the focus group in order to obtain a more detailed depiction of teacher experiences. Participants in the focus group and participants who were interviewed differed, which allowed for more flexibility in scheduling sessions. Unlike the focus group, the interviews consisted of more in-depth questions that allowed for participants to elaborate on comments that were

made during the focus groups. Each interview lasted between 20 to 40 minutes on a

WebEx platform. Prior to the interview, the researcher let the participants know that the

interview would be recorded solely for the interviewer to review responses while

compiling the data.

Table 3

Interview Question Alignment

Interview Question	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
How has it been to teach in-person post-lockdown from COVID-19?	x		x
Any specific challenges that you have noted through these past few years since teaching post lockdown?	x	x	x
What are your feelings towards teaching in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic?	x		
Do you feel as an effective of a teacher in post-lockdown as you had during pre-lockdown?	x	x	
How do you receive the information about the changing CDC health and safety protocols regulations? Do you feel as though this is the best way to communicate the information?		x	x
What is the most challenging part of implementing the protocols from the CDC these changes within the classroom setting?		x	x
Do you feel as though the guidelines and regulations created by the CDC allowed for an environment that	x	x	x

ensured health and safety of students and staff members? Why or why not?			
Did you receive any support from the district or state level in order to feel comfortable in implementing the safety protocols?	x	x	x
What are the biggest differences from teaching in-person pre-lockdown and post-lockdown?	x		x
Do you feel as though your building as a whole have adapted their teaching methods to meet the needs of the CDC guidelines effectively? Why or why not?	x	x	x

Artifacts

After the focus group and interview had been completed, the researcher then collected artifacts from each of the three districts in order to further understand the culture and structure of the schools. The artifacts consisted of, but are not limited to, memos and letters found on the school website, any information the school building leaders shared with the researcher, and any information or artifacts collected from the participants during the focus groups and interviews. After the collection of artifacts, the researcher used the information to find a common theme between districts and participants who taught during the pandemic.

Table 4

Artifacts Alignment

Artifact	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
Official CDC Poster Guidelines and Regulations for School Districts		x	
Memorandums from district/building administration about CDC guidelines and regulations		x	x
District Website Resources in regards to CDC guidelines and regulations		x	
District/Building Level Social Media Page		x	x

Trustworthiness of the Design

In order to establish the reliability and validity of the current research study, there was a triangulation of data. Triangulation of data is the process of obtaining data from multiple sources in order to assure that the findings are in alignment and the conclusions made from all three sources are similar. This in turn provides the current study with reliability, trustworthiness, and credibility (Creswell & Stake, 2013). The focus groups, interview, and artifacts were used interchangeably in order to code the findings and transcripts to a common theme that occurred when participants taught in-person during a pandemic, which provided validity to the findings. The three sources of data collection

also allowed for the researcher to have a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon being studied.

Participation was explicitly written and verbally stated as voluntary to maintain the credibility of the study. The researcher ensured each participant was aware from the beginning of the research that they were able to drop out of the research at any point for any reason. If participants dropped out, it would be noted in the data analysis section in order to maintain accuracy in the conclusions of the study. This process ensured the study's trustworthiness since the responses of participants were deemed authentic and honest, as they were not under pressure to continue with the study.

Lastly, a member checking was used to establish the credibility of the findings and interpretations of participants' responses. This was done by providing an analysis of the data collected from the focus groups, interviews, and artifacts to all of the participants to make sure that the interpretations and data presented by the researcher was an accurate depiction of participants' experiences. If a participant did not agree with the data analysis, the researcher edited the information in order to get the most accurate description of the results. This process also allowed participants to feel more involved in research process, which the researcher believed would build a trusting relationship between the participants and researcher.

Research Ethics

Prior to collecting any data or contacting any participants, the researcher received approval from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This ensured that the researcher understood the importance of protecting the participants involved in the study

and kept their identities private. There were no risks to the participants who voluntarily decided to be involved in the research.

Once IRB approved the current study, the researcher contacted primary school teachers who fit the criteria. The researcher then gathered additional participants through a snowball or chain sampling in order to recruit additional teachers from other districts. A letter was emailed to the voluntary participants explaining the research being conducted, a letter from the University, as well as consent forms from the researcher explaining the current study including the following information: research questions, the purpose of the study, focus group questions, interview questions, and artifacts that were used during the data collection process.

Once the participants agreed to the research being conducted and signed the consent forms, individual interviews were scheduled and took place. Interviews were conducted either through WebEx or through phone interviews. At any time, participants were able to stop participating in the study. If such an event occurred, it would be noted in the data collection. Each participant received the same letters that the school building administration received via their professional email and were given time to review the information prior to collecting data.

While conducting the focus groups and interviews, the researcher must be aware that there might be a perceived power imbalance (Creswell, 2013). This potential power imbalance was addressed by posed questions that were open-ended and not leading questions. Participants in the focus group and interviews were given access to questions prior to their meeting times. This allowed for participants to become more comfortable and build trust with the researcher. Lastly, the researcher provided a copy of the data

analysis to the participants in order for the participants to review the material and be reassured that the researcher interpreted the responses accurately.

Data Analysis Approach

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to explore the perception and experiences of teachers supporting in-person education while adhering to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a phenomenological study, the researcher went through the process of bracketing personal experiences in order to avoid any interference with the findings. Moustakas (1994) refers to this as a critical part of this type of study that the researcher should take before collecting any data.

Due to the nature of a phenomenological study, data is collected through qualitative means of focus groups, interviews, and artifacts. These qualitative data sources were used in order to understand how participants experienced a phenomenon.

Focus Groups

While conducting the two focus groups via WebEx, the researcher recorded the sessions. The participants were notified and reminded that the focus group would be recorded for the sole purpose of referring back to information during the data analysis process. From the recordings, a transcript was created in order for the researcher to compile the data into clusters of meanings or themes, also known as coding (Moustakas, 1994, Saldaña, 2013). Coding is an important step during a qualitative data analysis because it serves as a link between the data that has been collected and the meaning behind the data (Saldaña, 2013).

Interviews

Similar to the focus groups, the interviews took place via WebEx. This allowed the researcher to record the sessions in order to refer back to the data during the data analysis process. After creating a transcript of the discussions between each participant and the researcher, the researcher coded the transcript to find the key points and themes that arose during all five interviews. After coding the interviews, the researcher compared the themes that surfaced with the themes that were found during the focus group coding. The researcher noted when both the focus group and interviews had similar themes arise or apparent differences.

Artifacts

The artifacts that were collected during this current study allowed the researcher to further analyze the effect that the CDC health and safety guidelines had on primary school buildings. The first artifact collection explained how information has been displayed to school districts in regard to safety and health guidelines from the CDC. The additional artifacts provided a more comprehensive picture of how the school district and building have relayed the information from the CDC to the staff and, in turn, how the staff implemented those guidelines and protocols within their classroom. After collecting all the artifacts, the researcher coded the information in order to come up with a common theme. The researcher then compared the coding from all three data sources in order to create an overall theme. This theme was used to cohesively find answers to the research questions posed in this study.

Coding

  The researcher analyzed the data, consisting of transcripts from the interviews and focus groups. The researcher read each of the sources of data several times, noting an initial set of codes relating to my research questions. Then the researcher did an initial round of coding of each of the data sources. After reviewing these codes, the researcher combined related and overlapping codes and proceeded with a second round of analysis. Finally, the main themes emerged from this second round of coding. The following table shows the themes that emerged from the coding process:

Table 5

Coding Themes

Research Question	Themes	Data Source	Trustworthiness
Perceptions and Experiences	-Fear -Hope -Stress -Uncertainty and Change	-Focus Groups -Interviews	-Triangulation of Data Source -Member Checking
Understanding Guidelines	-Confusion -Frustration -Differences in External Perceptions verses Reality	-Focus Groups -Interviews -Artifacts (school district social media account and website)	-Triangulation of Data Source -Member Checking
Responding to Shifts in Procedures	-Altered Physical Space in Classroom -Patterns of Collaboration	-Focus Groups -Interviews	-Triangulation of Data Source -Member Checking

Researcher Role

The role of the researcher in this study is as follows: to contact all participants via email on an individual basis at the beginning of the current study, to share via email the consent forms from the university, to write the focus group questions, interview questions, and to develop the purpose of the study. The researcher was also tasked with organizing, scheduling, and facilitating the focus groups that will be taking place at the beginning of the data collection process, as well as interviewing the participants on an individual basis. After all the data was collected, the researcher then analyzed the data and identified the important findings.

The researcher is currently teaching as a special education teacher in a kindergarten co-teaching intergraded classroom in a public primary school on Long Island, New York. The researcher has been teaching in the current position for seven years, including the years during the pandemic. Given the current position of the researcher, the researcher has biases in regard to the current study. It is imperative to separate the personal experiences that the researcher went through and allow for the participants to express their own personal experiences while teaching during the pandemic. The researcher did not share any personal experiences with participants throughout the focus groups or interview process.

Prior to conducting a study, it is important that the researcher considered how the questions for the focus group and interviews could have potential biases, based on their wording. The questions for the focus group and interviews were kept simple, open-ended, and worded carefully in order to avoid potential biases. It was also important for the researcher to gain trust with the participants in order to receive truthful and detailed

answers (Creswell, 2013). This was accomplished by encouraging participants to ask any questions they had about the current study prior to collecting any data. Additionally, the identities of participants were kept anonymous.

Conclusion

It is the goal of the researcher to further understand, from a primary school teacher's perspective, how the changing CDC regulations and guidelines have affected the daily routine in the classroom. In the following chapter, the results from the focus group, interviews, and artifacts will be coded and analyzed in order to find any common factors.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

This phenomenological study is designed to explore the perception and experiences of teachers who taught during in-person learning and simultaneously adhered to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study will examine this period of time through teachers' views and experiences within the classroom and will provide a closer look into the memos and social media posts that the school district has provided through their school website.

The researcher conducted five individual interviews as well as two focus groups in order to obtain qualitative data on the experiences of veteran primary school teachers. Both focus groups contained five participants, with ten different participants altogether. All participants were employed by one of three public school districts in Long Island, New York and taught between kindergartens through second grade. All participants taught in their respective grade level at least four years prior to the pandemic lockdown and continued to teach in the same grade level throughout all stages of the pandemic. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were free to share as much as they wanted from their personal experiences. The researcher guided the conversation in the focus groups and interviews with the use of the discussion questions but did not give any input on her personal experiences in order not to introduce biases into the conversation.

The sections throughout Chapter 4 are based on the research questions posed and the data collected through interviews, focus groups, and artifacts. These sections are as follows: "Perceptions and Expectations" (Research Question 1), "Understanding

Guidelines" (Research Question 2), and "Responding to the Shift in Protocols" (Research Question 3). In "Perceptions and Expectations," , there are four themes that were derived from the data: "Fear," "Hope," "Professional and Personal Stress," and "Uncertainty and Change." In "Understanding Guidelines," the three themes derived from the data were "Confusion," "Frustration," and "Differences in External Perceptions Versus Reality." In "Responding to the Shift in Protocols," the two themes were "Changes in Classrooms" and "Patterns of Collaboration." Before the themes are presented, a brief description of the contextual background of the study will be provided in order to better understand and situate the findings.

Covid-19 Context

In order to understand the severe overall challenges of this time period, one must have a good understanding of the timeline. COVID-19 first emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.). The World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of the outbreak in China 19 days after the first reported case and immediately started to work on studying the pneumonia-like virus. As the WHO studied the virus, cases slowly began to spread to Thailand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (CDC, n.d.). Although the United States of America started to implement passenger screenings in major airports, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Washington State on January 20, 2020. By January 26, 2020, there were five reported cases in four different states.

According to the CDC, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (CDC, n.d.). The CDC reported that at this time, a reported 11,800 cases were documented between 114 counties as well as 4,291 deaths. On Friday, March 13, 2020,

school buildings all around New York closed their doors for the weekend and would remain closed due to the shutdown that was implemented on Monday, March 15, 2020 (CDC, n.d.). This shutdown required school buildings to remain closed and students to remain within their individual homes. The shutdown was an effort to decrease the number of positive COVID-19 cases by eliminating the need for people to be together in an enclosed space, since health officials knew the virus was highly contagious. At this time, Suffolk County, Long Island surpassed 1,000 positive cases of COVID-19 and reached 22 deaths from the virus; after a 48-hour time span, the death total was 69 (Sampson, 2021).

Initially, for New York State, few knew how long the shutdown of schools would last, especially in light of the rising death total on Long Island and around the world. After two weeks, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo extended the lockdown, which prompted primary school teachers to provide remote learning to their students. Some New York State school districts had even started the process of remote learning a few days after the initial shutdown (Sampson, 2021). Although every district had its own standards of what remote learning would look like during this time, primary school teachers across the state at minimum needed to ensure all students were contacted and maintained some form of connection to their teacher and school community. Many of the decisions made in regard to remote learning were made rapidly since changes were happening in a short amount of time (Sampson, 2021).

Extensions for the shutdown continued until May 1, 2020, when Governor Cuomo officially canceled in-person learning for the remainder of the school year in New York (Sampson, 2021). For primary school teachers, this meant that remote learning and daily

connections with students would continue to occur until the last day of the school year. By the conclusion of the academic year, , Suffolk County had a total of 1,945 deaths from COVID-19 (Sampson, 2021).

In September 2020, schools on Long Island were allowed to resume in-person learning, with the expectation to provide remote learning for families that choose to continue with the remote model (Sampson, 2021). Strict CDC guidelines and regulations had to be followed to ensure a safe environment for students and staff. According to the CDC, the guidelines include the following: (a) students and staff are required to wear masks, (b) hand washing is mandatory to maintain good hygiene, (c) social distancing protocols are implemented in and out of the classroom, (d) students have desk barriers, and (e) students remain in their classrooms in order to effectively contact trace if exposed to someone who tests positive (CDC, n.d.). Before students reentered the classroom, primary school teachers had to ensure that they positioned all desks three feet apart with barriers in place, and removed any play areas since students were no longer allowed in close proximity to each other. Furthermore, to prevent the spread of germs, students were no longer allowed to share school materials. With all of these guidelines and regulations put into place by the CDC, primary school teachers were left with the task of not only providing an education to their incoming students but also ensuring that health and safety were made a top priority in the classroom.

Perceptions and Experiences

The following section explores themes related to primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences during the period in which schools returned to in-person teaching following the COVID-19 lockdown. . Based on the data analyzed, this section is

separated into four themes: "Fear," "Hope," "Professional and Personal Stress," and "Uncertainty and Change."

Fear

Given the overall context of the pandemic, it is understandable that fear was an underlying concern that was shared by the participants in this study. These feelings of fear were often related to the unknown ongoing effects of the pandemic as well as uncertainties about the future of how primary school teachers were going to be expected to teach. Participants felt fear during the transition to online learning during the shutdown and when they returned to the school building for in-person teaching rather than virtual learning from home. Participants also continued to experience strong feelings of fear throughout the first school year back after the lockdown.

Fear of the Virus. Given the human toll of the pandemic, participants' most immediate sense of fear emanated from the very real danger of catching, spreading, and succumbing to the virus. Those who had lost friends, colleagues, or loved ones to the virus most immediately felt this fear. During the interview portion of the data collection, Olivia tearfully expressed:

> My family lost someone extremely significant in our lives due to COVID. I actually hated teaching in person because of the idea of getting COVID, or my students getting COVID, and really everything that had to do with COVID. It was a daily reminder that my family's life was forever changed because of COVID.

Olivia was not alone in experiencing this emotion. Many of the participants during the focus groups and interviews were not only fearful of their own lives, but also the lives of their students and loved ones.

This fear changed how primary school teachers viewed priorities in their personal lives and how they approached their profession. For example, one of the results identified in this study was a phenomenon whereby the participants began to think twice before approaching a student to provide help– an action that nearly all participants had done without hesitation before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thomas explained during his interview:

> I now have to worry about my health and safety, and the health and safety of my students more than I ever had to before. I always have the thought of COVID in the back of my mind when I go to help a student or if I get too close. I have to think twice when a child hugs me or grabs my hand. I have to worry when a student asks me to hold something or open their food items, etc. I cringe when a child coughs or sneezes... I also try to replay the days in my mind to determine if I've been too close to that child who has COVID and if I now could get COVID, too.

The daily interactions between teacher and student were affected by the underlying fear of the physical effects of the virus. It seemed that primary school teachers in particular had a very hard time with the transition back to in-person instruction, given that this group, more than middle or high school teachers, is expected to provide more intensive support to younger children. This intensive support could entail helping a student by giving a comforting hug or modeling how to play appropriately with another student. However, many participants became fearful of these previously common interactions and often reported trying to avoid them, with many of the participants in the focus groups and interviews expressing this type of fear and concern.

One of the participants in particular, Laura, expressed that she once felt herself to be a warm, loving, and caring kindergarten teacher, but that over the course of the pandemic became more of a cold and standoffish teacher. Laura provided an example of a kindergartener crying in her classroom and recounted the feeling she had:

> The one moment that will forever be engraved in my memory was when a student of mine was hysterically crying over something that happened at her home. She was craving for some sort of comfort from me. And all I could do was try to comfort her with my words, with a plastic divider that separated us. There was no way I could hug her and it felt so unnatural for me.

After sharing her story, the participants in Laura's focus group all nodded their heads in understanding and sympathy with what she experienced.

Fear of the Unknown. Though in retrospect the COVID-19 pandemic had a beginning and eventual end, participants could not know when this period of extreme disruption and trauma would cease. They were therefore forced to process their fears of not knowing when the pandemic would end and their fears about what the next day would bring in their classrooms. During his interview, Matthew expressed:

> This whole experience was full of unknowns. When we went back into the classroom, the question would come into my head often of how long this whole thing was going to last. Was this the new norm in teaching? How long do I give the new normal until I find a new career?

Other participants in the focus group similarly considered how long the pandemic-related changes would last and were fearful of this "new normal." As the expectations of teachers within the classroom changed during this period, many of the participants started

to realize that this "unknown" might be a long-term concern. The participants expressed that when they no longer felt the reward of students enjoying a welcoming and productive classroom, and the reward of watching students grow academically throughout the school year, their passion for teaching diminished. As the pandemic wore on, participants were fearful of the lasting effects this would have, both on their students and their interest in and passion for teaching.

In addition to participants' fear of the long-term uncertainties of the future, fear of the short-term was also discussed during focus groups and interviews. Before the pandemic, primary school teachers controlled and ran their classrooms, created their own procedures for students to follow, and had a general set of expectations of how a given day might proceed. With the implementation of CDC guidelines and regulations, teachers were forced to let go of some of this control to make health a top priority in their daily routines and allow an outside organization to influence how they ran their daily routines with their students. The seemingly constant changing of guidelines and lack of control left teachers fearing the specter of looming changes and inconsistency related to health guidelines. Much like teachers' fears about the uncertainties of the long-term future, similar feelings of apprehension arose in participants when they considered shorter-term, day-to-day uncertainties.

Hope

Although most of the participants expressed fear in regard to the transition back to in-person teaching, some teachers expressed feelings of hope and acknowledged how important it was to return to the classroom. Christina's experience captured this idea:

First and foremost, I enjoyed being back in the classroom with my students post-lockdown. As a Kindergarten teacher, I realized how important and beneficial it is for students to be learning in person. I found that my primary-aged students are much more attentive, engaged, successful, and cooperative in the classroom setting. It provides them with an interactive and social setting in which they can learn, play, navigate social situations, and problem-solve along with their peers, even with the guidelines in place. This to me is the essence of primary school. In the beginning, it was scary to be responsible for so many little lives. However, the fact of the matter is that students need to be in person in order for school to be impactful, meaningful, and effective.

It is important to note that Christina was the youngest of the participants within the focus groups—and therefore less at risk for serious health complications from the virus—and had the least number of years working within the district. After Christina expressed her positive outlook about the transition back to in-person teaching, the other teachers within the focus group expressed their understanding of her feelings but restated that their concerns overrode their excitement to be back in the classroom.

Many participants agreed that trying to teach primary school-aged children by means of virtual instruction was not only near impossible but also "laughable." The participants retold stories about their time teaching virtually and how they felt that the whole experience was "ridiculous." However, after sharing these stories about virtual teaching, many participants still felt that they would have preferred to teach virtually than risk their health and their family's health. The overall feeling of "health before

education" was apparent during the discussion as participants acknowledged that their specific student population of young learners required extra support and physical contact.

Stress

Stress was another significant underlying emotion that the participants felt as they discussed the transition back to in-person teaching. This theme is further broken down into two subthemes to better demonstrate the different levels of stress that was happening during this time: Professional Stress and Personal Stress.

Professional Stress. All the participants in this study were experienced primary school teachers who had years of teaching primary aged children prior to COVID-19 and were aware of the amount of support and care required by this age group. Teachers described the students in this age group as needing someone who can be there to give them a hug, someone who will not be grossed out by a student's runny nose, someone who is not concerned by a student sneezing on them while doing a small group lesson, or someone who does not mind getting on the floor in order to support a student or teach a lesson. James expressed the stress he felt during this time:

> For me, it was very challenging. With the social distancing, masks, frequent hand washing, anxiety and fear of getting sick, along with the uncertainty of whether or not you might have to teach virtually, while teaching in person. It was all very stressful. I certainly felt like it was a forced teaching style, one that definitely wasn't natural for me. I found myself not being the teacher I once was, and definitely not effective.

After James expressed this thought, Sarah agreed:

Worrying about mask safety, children being properly spaced together, germs in

the classroom, desk dividers, independent playtime, even someone coughing. It

was very scary. It is definitely not a moment in time that I want to relive in my

teaching career.

This stress affected how participants spent their time during the school day and set

priorities in their classroom.

The classroom during this time period was no longer focused on teaching new

material to students; instead, it became a place where teachers needed to enforce

guidelines to keep children safe. For instance, Emily said:

I know that I went into the teaching field to help children meet their fullest

potential but instead I felt like I was a drill sergeant telling these children to pull

their masks back on or stay further away from their friends. To put it lightly, it

was as if I was teaching in a prison for children. I did not become a teacher to do

this. It was the most stressful moment of my career.

Participants agreed that a major challenge and source of stress during this time

stemmed from the need to provide emotional support to children and simultaneously

contend with the mental and emotional stress that they personally felt For example, David

stated that, despite the incredible need to support students during this time of hardship

and fear, it remained hard for him to connect with his students and for them to in turn

trust him. Christina responded to David's statement by saying:

The students needed the support from all of us within the building but what is

never talked about was how much the adults needed emotional support as well. It

was near impossible to be the helper and guide within the classroom when I

myself needed the most help. After talking with other staff in the building, I know

I was not alone in this feeling.

What compounded this challenge, members of the group agreed, were the safety

protocols that were in place. Primary school teachers realized how difficult it was to

adapt to and keep up with both global changes and changes in their own classrooms. The

CDC's constantly evolving protocols to ensure health and safety within schools made

what used to be a controlled environment for teachers into a place where no one had any

control. This lack of control within the classroom made primary school teachers

emotionally distressed and anxiety-driven. The result of this stress forced many of the

participants in this study to the brink of leaving the teaching profession. In fact, a third of

the participants stated at one point in their focus group that they considered leaving the

teaching profession due to the overwhelming stress of teaching during COVID-19,

regardless of whether it was in-person or virtual instruction.

Personal Stress. For the purpose of this study, "personal stress" refers to the

stress related to a participant's personal health and safety outside of the classroom, and

the stress related to adhering to guidelines and protocols in their personal lives. The stress

of taking home the virus that could harm their families weighed heavily on all the

participants. During an interview with Kathy, she stated:

> It's been stressful. There are a lot of demands placed on teachers now. You need
>
> to worry about the health and welfare of each student and yourself and your
>
> family. Is there even a word that is a step above stress? Because that is how
>
> intense the stress feelings were at the time.

Throughout the shift to in-person teaching, each of the participants indicated they were on edge during the school year, regardless of the support in place. This included support provided by their school communities and support systems in their personal lives. For example, Anna reflected:

> In my building, I was very nervous to come back that first year during COVID as well. I had no idea what to expect. I was sure I was going to get sick or bring COVID back to my family. I cried and cried for weeks about it.

As one might assume, teachers' personal stress and concern in bringing home the virus affected their professional behavior. Olivia, who lost a loved one during the pandemic, mentioned this stressor during her interview. Losing a loved one not only changed Olivia as a teacher that year but also had a long-term impact on her personal life. . Specifically, Olivia explained that she carried her loss with her throughout the in-person school year. She mentioned that every physical symptom of potential illness—a cough, sniffle, or headache—would cause her to grow further away from her students at a time when they needed her the most. As Olivia made these statements during her interview, she looked down and spoke in a low voice. Olivia stated that she already lost one family member and planned to do everything in her power not to lose another one, even if that meant not being the teacher she once was. Olivia's experience is just one of many examples that reflect the deeply entrenched feelings of personal stress sparked by the transition to in-person learning.

Uncertainty and Change

Along with fear and stress, another theme derived from analysis of the data was participants' feeling of uncertainty and experiences with frequent change. The changes

that took place during the pandemic were unlike any previous changes the educational field had experienced. Teachers experienced changes to curriculum, classroom rules, patterns of behavior, daily expectations, and overall school culture. David encapsulated this perspective:

Although I was happy to be back in the classroom, I didn't realize the magnitude to which things would have to change. Parts of me felt like it would have been easier to just teach from home because teaching in school became very challenging and depressing. Who can teach students how to appropriately say their letter sounds behind masks and plastic borders? Not to mention, in my kindergarten classroom, I have always emphasized the importance of cooperative play, which is not even a thought this year. These poor students are missing out on so many vital pieces of what it is to be a kindergartener with all these changes.

David's experience was similar to many other participants within this study. The magnitude of change was difficult to anticipate until teachers were back in the classroom with students, which proved to be especially challenging to accept and adjust to for primary school teachers in particular. Standard practices within the primary school classroom, such as cooperative play, were not an option due to COVID-19 guidelines and protocols. In turn, teachers who sought to provide their students with an effective education felt these measures had a negative impact on their students.

Additionally, the participants conveyed that there were numerous adjustments that had to be made within a short period of time, which further contributed to their feelings of uncertainty. Alex made the following comment in regard to change:

All the tools that a teacher is used to using were either taken away or altered in some fashion. A colleague of mine compared it to a surgeon who has been told to operate without any modern tools or medicine. In addition, a teacher needed to be prepared to teach remotely at any given time so she/he needed to have tools and lessons plans prepped for various situations and skills. It was a lot of change, very quickly. We were building a plane in the air.

Once Alex made this comment, many of the other participants in the group quickly agreed. Many members of the focus group made comments such as "that is so true" and "many other professions could not have made as many changes as we had to." Alex continued: "It is interesting how we are from different districts yet we had similar experiences."

Primary school teachers who once would teach the importance of sharing, taking turns, and cooperative play had to quickly shift their mode of instruction: students were taught six feet apart from each other to prevent close social interaction, behind a plastic barrier, and while wearing masks. Many participants felt these changes resulted in significant negative effects on children, which they believed would follow their learners throughout their later years of schooling. Many referenced the important parts of curriculum and social skills that students were not being exposed to. For instance, Kathy mentioned that in discussions with her colleagues, the teachers in the upper elementary grades began to notice a large difference with the social and academic skill levels of the students who had been taught in the lower grades during the pandemic. Participants felt this deficit could be attributed to the changes that took place during the critical primary grades. Matthew expressed:

I have tried to maintain social distancing amongst my students and instill the

importance of personal space and hygiene. Many of my hands-on group work had

become more individualized hands-on experiences, so there is less sharing of

materials. I had to recreate lessons so that they are engaging but involved less

group work. You can say it was a "learning in isolation" kind of year.

The regulations that had to be followed by the classroom teachers had affected typical

classroom routines, but participants felt that this had the potential to affect the

development of that child for years to come. Matthew's comment suggest that students

are less experienced with collaborative group projects, and thus might indicate that these

are the kind of social and academic skills elementary school educators might expect to

observe in upcoming years.

Teachers of varying experience levels—from novice to veteran—were expected

to perform new tasks with unfamiliar materials, which also contributed to increased

feelings of uncertainty. . Notably, veteran teachers in particular expressed feeling lost

with the new expectations put on them and found it hard to balance the effective delivery

of curriculum while learning and successfully integrating new technology into their

classrooms. Little training was offered to teachers who were expected to immediately

implement drastically new teaching methods, and limited time was allocated for teachers

to familiarize themselves with new approaches, let alone process the traumatic events

taking place.. This in turn made veteran teachers feel as inexperienced as novice teachers.

With the need to follow CDC guidelines and regulations, teachers were forced to let go of

control in their classroom and make health a top priority in their daily routines. Many

participants expressed the uncertainty they felt surrounding these changes, especially

given the drastic changes they were forced to enact while also not knowing when the pandemic would end.

Despite the overall negative perceptions and experiences of change, many participants tried to voice a positive view on the changes that were happening during their return to in-person teaching. One of the participants, Dina, was the most vocal in her positive perception of the changes:

There have definitely been ups and downs teaching in-person. It's great being able to explain material to the students in person and do a better check in with them. Working virtually was difficult with Internet connection and having the students navigate the material. Having an adult there that could help the students virtually was a bit challenging. Now that we're in person it's nice to have more control over a lesson, within the guidelines. Overall, although there were changes, some of the changes made me a better teacher and challenged me to think more outside of the box. Rolling with the punches was my mantra that school year…granted the punches were harder to take depending on the day.

Although the majority of teachers found the changes in their experience teaching in-person post-lockdown in a negative light, teachers, such as Dina, viewed this time as an opportunity to grow as a teacher. These changes encouraged Dina to reexamine the way she taught and prompted her to think constructively about new ways to reach her students, both in and out of the classroom. Although the CDC guidelines remained a daily factor with which they needed to contend, some teachers found ways to make the experience a positive one for both themselves and students.

Understanding Guidelines

This section will examine how teachers understood and contended with federal and district-level guidelines and safety protocols. It will also explore how teachers attempted to adapt to the guidelines and protocols throughout the post-lockdown period. This section is separated into three themes: Confusion, Frustration, and Differences in External Perceptions Versus Reality.

Confusion

Participants' predominant experience of health guidelines during the pandemic was "confusion." Though districts tried to communicate the changes and updated protocols that were recommended by health authorities, many teachers felt overwhelmed with their responsibilities and could not keep up with the changes in protocol. Some of these protocol changes were necessary given the evolving understanding and science around the virus, yet all attempts at communication remained confusing.

This sense of confusion was widespread. With the restrictions on in-person staff meetings, most participants stated that they would receive information on safety protocols mainly through email. Emily explained:

> New changes were sent via the district with a message from the Superintendent or the head of Human Resources. It was the easiest way to get it out to everyone, but after a while, it became white noise.

After Emily made this comment, many participants in the focus group nodded their heads. The participants made comments such as, "I couldn't tell you what the changes were…I could not keep up with all the emails" and "I probably still have unopened

emails of the new protocols in my email to this day." John expressed a similar experience with communication and confusion:

> I received information regarding the changing CDC protocols through email from my principal or HR or from what I heard on the news. However, it has been ever changing and hard to keep straight. I had to ask the nurse for clarification constantly.

John further went on to say that he would try his best to abide by the protocols and guidelines throughout all the changes but admitted that aside from the commonly accepted ones–such as wearing a mask and maintaining some level of social distance–he did not follow the other guidelines as directed. He stated that during the months in which the number of COVID-19 cases rose, he would enforce all of the protocols that he knew about. John's logic was simple: limit the spread of the virus among his students to limit not only the possibility of quarantine but also reduce the possibility of being forced to transition to virtual instruction once again.

Although most participants agreed with their administration's attempt to get the news out in the most efficient and timely way possible to all of the staff, the participants did not feel that this helped them effectively keep their classroom in compliance with the CDC guidelines. Most participants commented that the overabundance of emails, which were common for most participants from every district, did little to alleviate their concerns. Sarah was also very confused about implementing updated guidelines and had often feared having to go virtual. She stated:

> Everything was altered, everything was constantly changing, and everything was just so confusing. I am not used to going into my email in the morning and

expected to change the look of my classroom because of some last-minute change

the CDC or the state wanted to make. This was certainly not why I became a

teacher. If the CDC police came into my classroom I would have definitely been

arrested. So many guidelines fell through the cracks because of the nature of the

year and the confusion of it all.

Many teachers felt overwhelmed and confused by the changes that were occurring.

Although their understanding of the broad guidelines was apparent, the implementation

of the specific, often-changing guidelines was questionable.

Overall, most of the participants had a similar feeling of confusion toward the

guidelines and admitted that they did not follow all of the protocols due to how quickly

and frequently they were changing. Not only was the information given to the

participants in a manner that was not fully well received—via email—but the amount of

change also became overwhelming. Participants' experiences showed that even though

administrators were disseminating the information to the staff, many were ignoring this

vital information due to the immense amount of change that was required of them at the

beginning of the school year.

Though confusion was a dominant experience among participants, Olivia had a

different experience. She stated in her interview:

My district followed all measures and worked with us to try to make teaching

during that time go as smoothly as possible. They were always available to

answer questions and ensured that everyone was as safe as possible. I have no

complaints or concerns about how everything rolled out in terms of following the

guidelines. At the end of the day, it was an extra level of protection against

COVID. I tried my best and made sure to not miss any important pieces.

After making this statement, Olivia started to further reflect on the experience that she

had while teaching during this time. She continued:

I guess part of me feels like everyone just did what was needed to stay safe,

healthy, and to make sure our students felt good and were able to thrive in every

way, given the circumstances.

The other participants did not try to follow the guidelines and protocols as Olivia did.

Olivia's experience of losing a loved one to COVID-19 made her more vigilant in order

to ensure that everyone in her classroom was safe and healthy. Her priority was health

and safety, and she prioritized sifting through the changing guidelines. Olivia's

experience illustrated how even during a stressful and traumatic experience like a

pandemic, teachers' previous experiences play a big role in how they run their classrooms

and the priorities they choose to focus on.

Frustration

Another important theme related to the complicated manner of the changing

protocols was the feeling of frustration. Participants were frustrated with the amount of

energy and time they put into making sure their classrooms were as safe as possible, as

well as contending with feelings that students' parents and guardians were not taking the

guidelines and protocols as seriously. Anna explained:

Aside from getting COVID, I was so nervous about having one of my students get

COVID and risking the rest of the class having to go virtual because we were all

exposed. I followed all the guidelines, all the protocols, but that still did not stop

my class from getting exposed and going virtual. What I learned from that

experience was that it didn't matter how on point I was in implementing the

guidelines and protocols, the students had outside lives and some families did not

take the risks seriously.

Anna's comment sparked more conversations in her focus group about how preventing

the spread of COVID-19 within the classroom was related to students' lives outside of the

classroom, rather than how much they tried to implement the guidelines within the

classroom.

Most participants agreed that they felt frustrated that they worked hard to read,

understand, and implement the CDC's guidelines and protocols, yet students' families did

not view the safeguards with the same seriousness of purpose. Christina expressed her

frustration with the circumstances and how it affected her adherence to the safety

guidelines:

On top of everything, parents were not making the safest decisions in order to not

get exposed. I think many of us have just decided to teach the way we used to and

just have our students' academic and social needs come first.

This was a significant finding regarding how teachers viewed and implemented

guidelines and protocols. Many of the participants began their academic school year with

good intentions and attempted to follow all safety precautions closely to ensure their

classroom was safe for everyone. However, as the demands of the changing guidelines

and protocols increased, many of the participants openly admitted to becoming frustrated

by elements out of their control, such as the social decisions students and their families

made outside of school. This in turn affected how teachers approached the

implementation of the guidelines, which included a decreasing focus on e CDC guidelines such as social distancing and appropriate mask wearing. Alex explained it in this comment:

> Guidelines were changing daily, weekly, monthly. Teachers had the daunting task of keeping their students safe, all while learning brand new platforms of teaching and still expected to ensure an incredible educational experience for all their students. Forget about the parents who made our job more challenging. It was like everything was going against us.

Laura added to the conversation after Alex's comment:

> I get upset when parents send their kids into school when they are obviously sick. Parents have always done this, but it's more upsetting now. I have a slight panic attack when I learn a child/family has COVID and I now have to gather their work and teach them online.

The frustration with circumstances related to parents and guardians was apparent. Other participants made similar comments such as "they just did not care" and "parents would send their kids to school, even if they were sick, after realizing how hard it was to teach them during virtual learning." The majority of the participants did not feel supported by the decisions made by their students' families and felt that their efforts toward creating a safe classroom environment were at odds with the families' social practices, which increased feelings of teacher frustration.

Differences in External Perceptions Versus Reality

Before the interviews and focus groups, the researcher examined each of the three school districts' social media pages and collected pictures and resources pertaining to

guidelines and protocols that each school posted during the time period explored in this study. All of the pictures and information posted on the school districts' websites followed the recommendations made by the state of New York and the CDC. According to website photos, students in all three districts wore their masks appropriately, maintained social distance from each other, washed their hands, and stayed behind plastic borders while learning. I shared some of these pictures with the participants during the interviews and focus groups to gauge their reactions to how these pictures represented their actual teaching experience and their respective school district's enforcement of state and CDC protocols. Their reactions varied. During her interview, Kathy stated:

> Although confusing, we all really tried our best in order to follow the guidelines. The one thing I will openly admit is that the amount of prepping before taking these pictures was exhausting. Taking a picture of a group of primary school students in a normal year is hard enough; imagine having to do it while knowing everyone was critiquing you based on the guidelines and protocols.

Kathy's statement was consistent with the majority of the participants. It was apparent that a lot of time went into every picture that was posted on the school website. Three participants stated that in their district, administrators and teachers were required to get any picture approved by at least two different staff members before posting online. This process served as a method of peer review intended to limit the risk of revealing something in pictures that did not abide by state and CDC guidelines and protocols. Whenever there was a question about a picture, the individual needed to either retake the picture or get final approval from the school nurse. This further proved that staff within a primary school understood the protocols and guidelines placed on them, but that the

implementation of protocols and guidelines was difficult for the age group of learners in the building.

While many participants took part in a similar procedure with the publication of pictures on their school's website, not all participants shared the same experience. During Emma's interview, she reflected on a different experience when it came to taking pictures in her classroom. She recalled one story from that period of time:

> Don't believe everything you see on the Internet. There was one time that my principal came into my room during playtime and I was under the impression that I distanced all the students appropriately but apparently I did not. The principal helped me move some of the students around and then she took a picture for the school webpage and left the room. Needless to say, the way we distanced for the picture was not what was actually happening in the classroom. We were putting out a false image to the public.

Stories such as Emma's and Kathy's were shared during focus groups as well. All of the participants, for instance, discussed the difficulty of having students keep their masks on throughout the day. Matthew stated:

> I am not too sure what people expected from the kids and us. You could tell that a few of the students were being trained at home on ways to appropriately wear their masks but the vast majority had a hard time. But could you blame them? They are only five [years old]. But in the pictures, you had better make sure that every mask was over your nose. Talk about giving out a false image of what is going on during the day.

After Matthew made this statement, all the participants in the focus groups nodded their heads, and some even giggled and rolled their eyes. All the participants admitted that they had a hard time enforcing their students to appropriately wear their masks throughout the school day. Based on the participants' recollections during their focus groups, these guidelines were made to make the public feel safe about sending their children to school. However, the age range of the students made it more challenging to ensure that this would come to fruition.

Responding to Shifts in Procedures

Many of the experienced primary school teachers changed the way they went about their days after the lockdown due to COVID-19. From the data collected, the researcher derived two findings to answer Research Question 3: Altered Physical Space in Classrooms and Patterns of Collaboration.

Altered Physical Space in Classrooms

Given the health strictures in place during the pandemic, classrooms looked drastically different in terms of their physical appearance. Primary school teachers were required to add barriers to students' desks, ensure each student was separated throughout the school day including playtime, enforce appropriate mask wear, and prioritize good hygiene including regular hand-washing and use of hand sanitizer. One of the main challenges related to the physical changes within the classroom due to guidelines and protocols was the age group of the students.

As mentioned in the previous data findings, despite attempts at re-organizing the physical classroom to make it safe, ensuring that primary school students complied with

the ever-changing guidelines posed a challenge for all the participants in this study. James mentioned during his focus group:

I think their guidelines probably worked better in the upper grades. The older students are more capable and independent. Primary students are not. I believe they were trying their best to think of ways we could be safe, but it's not realistic in the type of environment I teach in.

Others remarked on the challenges—and inherent ineffectiveness—of the physical changes made in the classroom to keep students safe that were also intended to allow for effective instruction. For instance, Alex said:

The most challenging part of implementing the protocols for me was social distancing kindergartners. It was so difficult because by nature we are social beings and telling 5 and 6 year olds that they could socialize but 6 feet away from one another was challenging. Also teaching through masks and barriers was also challenging because the barriers were often blurring and hard to see through.

Other participants remarked on the difficulty of implementing the guidelines and protocols in a primary school building and how physically altering the classroom conflicted with how a primary school classroom typically operated. Emily recounted her experience:

Implementing most protocols from the CDC was unrealistic in a Kindergarten classroom. Some of us would laugh at the absurdity of it. They wanted 4- and 5-year-olds to socially distance themselves. They wanted the teacher to not get too close. I assume none of them had ever taught in a primary school before.

David quickly responded after Emily's comment and suggested how the guidelines could have been adapted to the academic needs of different age groups:

> I think the CDC did what they could and thought was right at the time. We were dealing with many unknowns, which changed daily. Often the guidelines put in place were unrealistic to carry out within schools successfully and should have been thought out more clearly with regards to ages of students and school settings.

It became clear that, regardless of how much the physical classroom was altered, the guidelines and protocols were not ideal or age-appropriate given the school context of this study. In fact, all of the participants expressed some sort of challenge that the changes had made in their classrooms during this post-lockdown, in-person teaching period. Thomas mentioned in his interview:

> The rooms were not big enough to safely space the children out and keep the classroom looking like a classroom, which is naturally not a sterile institution. It took away the friendliness and warm atmosphere that is needed for early childhood classrooms.

The participants made it clear that in previous years, their classrooms were colorful, warm, welcoming, inclusive, child-centered, and friendly. The drastic change in what primary school classrooms looked like prior to COVID-19 in contrast to the post-lockdown period was not lost by any of the participants. Challenges and changes ranging from the upkeep of cleanliness in the classroom by the custodians to eliminating all the play furniture were discussed during this portion of the conversation.

Aside from the actual look of the classroom, many changes occurred that impacted the procedures for how the school year progressed. Anna said:

Instead of having shows and assemblies in a common area with other classes, our

principal created videos that we were able to show our class. During PARP

(parents as reading partners), parents were given an opportunity to record

themselves reading a book to share with their child's class. We had virtual Star

Students and parents participating in fun holiday activities via Google Meet.

The physical setting for learning, which normally would have included common areas

and large gatherings of the school community, became solely the classroom itself.

Students spent all of their day in the classroom instead of moving to various places

throughout the building. Participants cited several examples of the narrowing number of

physical spaces that students experienced. For example, instead of students moving to

different specialized rooms, subjects like physical education, art, and music were taught

by subject teachers who visited the classroom. Even non-academic social opportunities

like lunch, recess, and assemblies took place in the classroom. Maintaining the attention

and focus of students in this age range, who often needed and sought out physical

movement throughout the day, became a difficult task, especially when most of their

school day was spent seated behind a plastic shield. Participants also described the need

to eliminate the aspects of their classroom that typically made it a welcoming and

engaging environment. Although teachers were able to alter their routines based on the

CDC guidelines, participants noted that these restrictions affected student learning and

emotional health despite–and perhaps because of–the physical changes they made in their

classrooms.

Patterns of Collaboration

Alongside the changes that participants needed to account for within their physical classrooms was the second theme derived from the analysis: challenges of collaboration with staff. Primary school teachers typically depend heavily on other staff to plan curriculum, ensure all assessments and instruction are appropriately aligned with the grade level, and create an overall positive daily experience and culture within the building. Alex shared:

> Talk about a lonely time in teaching. My grade level would always meet every week during our lunch period in order to plan for the following week, discuss any changes, prep materials, plan out any shows that needed to be done that month, or even celebrate a birthday or major milestone in someone's life. Now we are left sitting at our desks in our own classrooms, collaborating through a Google Doc. No one wanted to meet in person for the fear of being exposed to COVID and it wiping out a whole grade level.

These changes and challenges in collaboration were something that nearly all the participants in this study reported experiencing.

Participants detailed how most collaboration was limited to a virtual or in-person grade level meeting. Yet, participants also reflected how this allotted time was often not enough to effectively collaborate with peers since administrators would also utilize the time to discuss changes in health guidelines and protocols. John recounted an event that happened to him during this time:

I share a hallway with people on the same grade level as me and, without any

exaggeration, I went a few weeks without seeing the teacher next door to me in

person even though we were teaching right next to each other.

Though some participants shared feelings of isolation from their colleagues in what had

typically been a collaborative atmosphere, some teachers, like Alex, felt that these

changes in collaborative routine had benefits:

I honestly did not mind the isolation. I get that people need human interaction in

order to stay sane, but during the school day, I was constantly moving, constantly

planning…there was no time to just enjoy the company of other staff members. I

created new materials and curriculum from years past, I was planning for students

who decided to stay virtual during the school year. There was not a lot of time in

the day to get everything done so I did not mind not having the pressure of

meeting with other teachers.

Regardless of their need for social interaction, teachers faced high demands during the

quickly changing environment during the pandemic, and some participants felt increased

time demands due to collaborative meeting expectations and rhythms.

Conclusion

This study's first research question examined teachers' perceptions and

experiences with in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three common

themes came out of an analysis of the data: "Fear," "Hope," "Professional and Personal

Stress," and "Uncertainty and Change." Related sub themes for "Fear" included fear of

getting sick, fear of bringing sickness to their own families, and fear of the unknown.

"Hope" referred to participants' perceptions of changes that occurred during in-person

teaching. "Professional and Personal Stress" included the emotions that participants felt

in the school building, as well as how that stress was carried back into the participants'

personal lives at home. "Uncertainty and Change" referred to how participants reacted to

the changing CDC guidelines and their feelings toward the events that transpired in their

buildings.

The second research question posed in this study focused on the participants'

understanding and implementation of the guidelines and protocols required by the CDC

and the state. In this section, the three themes derived from the data were: "Confusion,"

"Frustration," and "Differences in External Perceptions Versus Reality." Almost all of

the participants in this study felt overwhelmed by email updates regarding changes to

guidelines and protocols. Most of the participants had a hard time following through with

all of the changes due to the nature of the grades they taught and families' lack of

understanding regarding the risk of spreading COVID-19 throughout the class. Many

participants were frustrated with the lack of serious efforts on the families' part to follow

guidelines that limited the risk of COVID-19 in the classroom. Additionally, after

examining the pictures that school districts were posting during this time, participants

shared contradictory information about what the published pictures showed and what the

reality of school-wide enforcement of CDC guidelines actually looked like within the

privacy of the school building. The participants expressed the impossible feet of trying to

maintain appropriate mask-wearing and social distancing in this grade level.

The third research question delves deeper into how the participants responded to

the changes in their classrooms based on safety guidelines and protocols. In this section,

two themes emerged: "Changes in Classrooms" and "Patterns of Collaboration." Primary

school classrooms at this time looked very different than what they had looked like previously. What once was a welcoming, warm, colorful, and playful space of learning and exploration turned into a sterile environment. Play areas were removed and students were not given the opportunity to collaborate with each other socially or academically. Students were required to spend their learning days behind plastic shields. Subject specialists were expected to go to classrooms for their instruction, and lunch no longer took place in a cafeteria. Primary teachers had a hard time adapting to this change since this grade level is supposed to be taught through collaborative and child-friendly instruction. Furthermore, teachers were left in isolation with this new expectation of teaching. Teachers did not collaborate with each other on important grade level planning and did not actively build a positive school culture. It was not uncommon for teachers to not see other teachers for an extended period of time due to the fear of being exposed to COVID-19. In the following chapter, the findings will be interpreted and recommendations will be made for future practice and research.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

This phenomenological study was intended to understand primary school teachers' perspectives on teaching in-person after the COVID-19 lockdown and their ability to follow the guidelines and protocols provided by the CDC. The researcher conducted focus groups, recorded interviews, and examined artifacts from each of the three school districts that were a part of this study. The following three research questions were examined:

1. What are teachers' perceptions and experiences with in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How do teachers understand and implement federal and district-specific guidelines, CDC guidelines, and safety protocols within their classroom throughout the post-lockdown period?

3. How have teachers responded to shifting CDC guidelines for daily classroom routines and safety protocols throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

In the current chapter, the findings from the data collected and analyzed will be interpreted alongside the related research findings. Additionally, I will provide limitations of the current study and make recommendations for practitioners in the field in order to enhance the support that primary school teachers receive during forthcoming situations that present similar changes and challenges. Lastly, recommendations will be made for future research in order to further understand how primary school teachers experienced post-lockdown teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interpretation of the Findings

  The purpose of the current study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers returning to the classrooms after the COVID-19 lockdown. Additionally, the research also examined how the teachers understood the CDC guidelines and protocols as well as how their classroom and school experience changed during this time. The main findings are organized based on the research questions and theoretical framework.

Research Question 1

What were teachers' perceptions and experiences with in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

  The primary thematic findings from the interviews and focus groups related to primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of in-person teaching post-lockdown were "Fear," "Hope," Stress," and "Uncertainty and Change." All of the participants expressed some degree of fear as it related to contracting COVID-19, bringing COVID-19 back home to loved ones, and their students being exposed to the virus. This finding coincides with similar research on the difficulties and negative impact of the pandemic on teachers and students. For instance, Rubin (2020) states "school closures have made it difficult for schools to identify and address important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation" (p. 534). Children who were at risk benefited greatly from being in school; depending on their home situation, some children need to be in school more than others (Rubin, 2020). Without schools being physically open, students

lose out on significant learning and instruction, which contributes to their social, emotional, and academic developmental milestones.

Research Question 2

How did teachers understand and implement federal and district-specific guidelines, CDC guidelines, and safety protocols within their classroom environment throughout the post-lockdown period?

The main findings found that teachers experienced feelings of confusion and frustration in regard to evolving CDC guidelines and protocols. These guidelines and protocols were often revised and altered during the post-lockdown period, with important implications and effects on teachers and students. The lack of consistency was apparent. Participants reported having a difficult time abiding by the ever-changing rules and regulations and revealed the confusing communication strategies used by districts and leaders, such as receiving updates via email. This led to unsafe student learning environments. These findings align with research by Benjamin (2014), who states that school districts should start "planning ahead, instead of scrambling in a time of crisis…it is education's best chance for preventing and dealing with an outbreak of any kind" (p. 5). Benjamin's finding points to the importance of collaborative and intensive planning when it comes to emergency situations such as COVID-19.

However, it is important to note that both teachers and administrators experienced ongoing stressors during this time.. Administrators were required to address changes that were handed to them by government officials, and often at a rapid pace. The drastic changes that teachers experienced within their classrooms were directly related to the restrictions and demands that health authorities placed on district and building

administrators. These changes were often an unavoidable and unfortunate effect of the effort to keep schools open during the return to in-person teaching.

Research Question 3

How did teachers respond to the shifting CDC guidelines for daily classroom routines and safety protocols throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

The primary findings relating to participants' experiences of changes related to daily classroom routines and safety protocols were physical classroom changes and modifications to patterns of collaboration. An analysis of the data revealed the immense change within the classroom space that safety protocols and regulations required during this time. Primary school classrooms, which often included groupings of desks and students, were altered so that individual desks were six feet apart. Other typical elements that would make the classroom an engaging and inviting place for children– such as a play area, stuffed animals, and toys–were removed. Hernández et al. (2016) cites the primary grade level as the first time that a child is exposed to routines, rules, procedures, structure, and a new way of viewing the world around them, all while surrounded by peers their age. As such, the physical state of the post-lockdown classroom likely had an effect on primary students' views and acculturation to schooling. In addition to the challenges of changing the physical organization of the primary school classroom, study participants found themselves professionally isolated from other staff members and were unable to effectively collaborate with each other during this time. Many participants shared stories and expressed feelings of loneliness due to necessary restrictions in place to limit exposure to COVID-19. Many of the participants shared that, prior to COVID-19, teachers from their grade level would regularly meet during their lunch to plan, prep, or

to celebrate major milestones in a colleague's life. The switch to online meetings–of which many were focused on health guidelines and related concerns–had what many participants felt was a negative effect on school culture and professional collaboration in the building. Most participants felt scared, stressed, frustrated, and confused during this time and, compounding these challenges, did not have the chance to collaborate with other staff members in a way that might have helped them better weather these challenges. The majority of participants admitted to wanting to leave the profession during this time due to all of these factors.

Theoretical Framework

As reviewed in Chapter 2, the culture theory by Schein and change theory by Lewin were used in order to frame this study and apply a lens to review and analyze the collected data. Within this study, after examining the artifacts that were found within the district's website, certain parts of the culture within the buildings were exposed, such as the value of keeping students safe, the staff's ability to follow the guidelines and protocols, as well as the administration's ability to communicate and enforce the guidelines and protocols. The participants in this study provided a different view of the culture within the building once they were shown artifacts and asked to comment on them. The view provided by participants was one that was not seen by the images posted on each school's public website. Schein's theory proves to be a useful tool for understanding the many levels of culture within an organization. It was important to not only examine existing artifacts throughout this study, but also to examine the meaning behind them and the underlying values based on what staff members said about them.

Lewin's change theory also helped to frame the drastic changes that were occurring during this time. Lewin emphasizes the importance of effectively managing change in a calculated way in order to better guarantee success. Within this study, change was an important underlying theme for the challenges of the pandemic and the health and safety guidelines required by health authorities. Although it was not possible to go through all the stages of change because of the rapid pace of immediate and mandatory change that had to take place, it is important to view these different stages in order to assess how successful necessary changes took place. It is also important to view these different stages to better prepare for the future in case a similar disruption in our education system and classroom instruction happens again.

Lewin emphasizes the importance of communicating often and empowering action once a change has occurred, and this idea held true during the transition back into the classrooms after the lockdown. Many participants within the study stressed the importance of communication since there was a sense of isolation and uncertainty regarding how to proceed. However, it is important to note that the type of communication matters as well. While administrators were utilizing email to communicate the changes in guidelines, many participants reported ignoring these emails due to their frequency. Participants also admitted to not following all of the guidelines accurately. Furthermore, participants felt the need to feel seen and heard during the change process. Administrators need to ensure that teachers feel empowered so that they can make changes with accuracy.

Although the culture theory by Schein and the change theory by Lewin were helpful during this study, there were findings that suggest that these theories did not take

certain factors into consideration. Schein's Three Levels of Culture was a useful framework to use during the current study, but it is worth noting that the unique experience of COVID-19 presented challenges to the use of the culture theory when studying a school building during a pandemic. Schools were under restrictions during the lockdown even though there was learning happening within classrooms. Teachers, students, and staff found themselves isolated and fearful. Due to the heightened emotional state of the staff and what participants felt were the confusing CDC guidelines and protocols, it is hard to define an accurate account of the culture within a building since typical elements of school culture were regularly changing. For example, when the researcher showed the participants pictures posted on the school district's social media page, participants were quick to mention the false reality that the district was showing to the public. The immense amount of attention to detail that was taken into consideration in order to capture a moment of time in turn affects the reading of the culture within the district. Everything was micromanaged at the time so culture was difficult to assess accurately.

The process of change envisioned by Lewin was designed and conceptualized to be implemented during a time when a meaningful and calculated change could be made within an organization, such as when a new reading program is implemented in a school district. Lewin did not create the Change Theory with the knowledge that a global pandemic would considerably impact the pace at which change occurs. Administrators and staff did not have the luxury of time to go through the process of "unfreeze, change, and refreeze" in order to implement effective and beneficial change, as Lewin intended

(Lewin, 1940). Instead, administrators and staff were given a list of changes that needed to be made quickly in order for in-person learning to occur safely during a pandemic.

Relationship to Prior Research

Though researchers like Levinson (2020) support the decisions to prioritize the opening of primary schools during a health crisis like COVID-19, the findings of this study showed that teachers prioritized physical health and safety. None of the study participants viewed returning to in-class instruction in school buildings through the lens of students who were struggling academically and might have been facing other difficulties as a result of learning from home during the lockdown. This explains the importance of having the teacher's voice heard as well as other educational professionals during a time of change within an educational setting. The data shows that teachers prioritized their health and safety, which had a direct effect on the education students received within the classroom.

Each of the participants discussed feeling high levels of stress at the thought of transitioning back into the classroom and having to implement CDC guidelines with primary grade students. This stress was connected to the experience of teachers who were no longer allowed to help students like they once were able to. For example, a teacher was not allowed to hug a student if they were crying and instead may have felt compelled to walk away if a student started to cough. Positive experiences while in the primary grades have proven to have a long-lasting effect on students in their future academic careers (Hernández et al., 2016), so the negative effects of a stressful learning environment, and their subsequent effects on student-teacher interactions, will likely have long-term effects on student learning.

Additionally, primary school is a time when children can improve their social and cognitive skills in order to be higher-level thinking adults who are able to work collaboratively with others (Adıgüzel et al., 2017). Participants understood the magnitude of disservice this group of students would experience due to the ongoing changes teachers encountered with CDC guidelines and protocols. Participants expressed that they were going into the school year with not only a great deal of fear and stress, but also little hope of effectively providing a primary school experience to their students.

The findings related to the second research question show teachers' frustration with students being exposed to COVID-19 outside of the school building. . Participants felt that many parents were not appropriately following CDC guidelines and regulations, and in turn risked exposing the rest of the class to COVID-19. Participants were frustrated with the amount of time and attention they paid to changing their classrooms to meet CDC guidelines while; they felt, parents and guardians were not. Previous literature demonstrates that parents send children to school with mild symptoms of illness since parents are often unable to get time off of work or arrange childcare (Hinton, 2017). This literature finding is important to take into consideration since; similarly, it sheds light on why parents might have sent their children with mild symptoms to school during this time period.

When comparing the physical images on school districts' websites to the experiences of participants, teachers reported that their experience with students following CDC guidelines and protocols were significantly different from website images. Most participants expressed their challenges with enforcing primary school students to follow the guidelines and protocols. Participants stated that primary school

students, with few exceptions, were not able to keep masks above their noses and had a hard time social distancing at least six feet apart throughout the school day. As Fullerton (2021) states, "What's often posted to social media is inherently biased, as very few people will post photos or updates about their flaws... It's important for people to take a step back and recognize that what is being posted isn't reality" (para. 10). Several of the participants shared a similar false reality that Fullerton (2021) explains when they stated that their district had staff members looking over photos before posting online to make sure that every student in the photo appeared to follow CDC guidelines. The participants noted the false reality that was given to the public in each of the three school districts' website photos.

The physical setup of a primary school classroom during this time contradicts what the literature says a primary school classroom should look like. Shahli et al. (2020) explains how the play area, rug area, and a primary classroom in general are specifically designed to provide "the elements of welcoming, comfortable, safety and security to foster engagement of children with the learning environment" (p. 2). Participants felt that the physical changes would impact this population of students, since for many it would be their first formal introduction to the public school education system. Before the pandemic, primary school teachers were often concerned about organizing school supplies and introducing play centers during the first few days of school; during the post-lockdown period, teachers dedicated time to finding social stories about wearing masks and made sure their classroom followed guidelines and safety protocols. Many participants felt that their classrooms did not look welcoming and were concerned that their students would not feel comfortable or safe in this type of learning environment.

The majority of participants also mentioned that they were unable to pursue the goals and vision that motivated them to become teachers because of the changes that had to be made. Adıgüzel et al., (2017) posit that primary teachers value play and socialization time more than instructional time with students due to the major impact play and socialization have on the child's long-term development. These findings align with the findings in this current study. Primary school teachers felt a large proportion of their curriculum was not being met due to the lack of socialization and the time spent on physical precautions designed to keep students safe. Many participants felt as though their students were not being fully prepared socially, emotionally, and academically, and that this lack of preparation would affect their students for the rest of their academic careers. Participants lacked the ability to strategically develop and organize lessons based on child development and were unable to teach important socialization skills, which was detrimental to student learning. Shahli et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of this type of lesson development and state that when it does not occur, students will not have a successful academic future.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain deeper insight into how experienced primary school teachers dealt with in-person teaching after the COVID-19 lockdown and how they reacted to and implemented guidelines. Due to the nature of a phenomenological study, there is a limitation on the sample size when the data collection process is conducted. Although I was able to address each of the research questions with a sample size of fifteen teachers, a larger sample size would likely increase the

trustworthiness of the current study and allow for more diverse findings related to teacher experiences during the pandemic.

Furthermore, this sample size takes into account only three school districts, all with very similar demographics and accomplishments. Therefore, there is a limitation in the diversity of the participants and setting within this study. All teachers in this study were in comfortable teaching positions within their careers and in districts that did not have a lot of external issues, such as long-term funding pressures (aside from changes with in-person teaching during the post-lockdown period). The data may show different results if more diversity with not only the participants themselves but also the school districts in which participants worked were achieved. Specifically, future studies may want to consider participants who teach in districts that are not as affluent as those in the current study. Additionally, this study includes districts only on Long Island, New York, and thus the results do not represent how primary school teachers felt in districts outside of Long Island. Different state guidelines may skew how teachers view teaching during this period since some states were not as strict about CDC guidelines as others. Though the findings of this study cannot be generalized outside of these districts, this is not the aim of qualitative research, which instead seeks to explore a phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2013).

Due to the design of this study, the participants were all experienced teachers with years of experience within their current grade levels. There may be a significant difference in the data collected if the participants were not veteran primary school teachers. It would be beneficial to examine how untenured primary school teachers felt during this time period and gain better insight as to how untenured teachers adjusted to

the changing guidelines and protocols. Another limitation of the current study is that only primary school teachers were interviewed during the data process. Although primary school does have its own unique challenges, it would be interesting to see how secondary and elementary school teachers felt during in-person teaching post-lockdown and what challenges were presented. A comparison of different grade levels may lead to more comprehensive discussions about how to better support a whole school district during a pandemic rather than just one portion of a school district.

One final limitation of this study is the researcher's experience with COVID-19 in the primary school setting. This experience may have allowed for bias to be introduced during the interpretation of data. Even though the researcher attempted to bracket her personal experience in order to avoid any interference with the findings, it is still possible that bias impacted the interpretation of data. To limit this possibility, I also engaged in the process of member checking: participants were given a script of the focus group or interview they participated in as well as the initial set of study findings. If the participants did not agree with the findings that the researcher presented them with, they were given the opportunity to clarify any misinterpretations.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Recommendations are based on the results found during the current study. This study would be beneficial to many stakeholders within a school district: administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and policymakers.

Since another pandemic or comparable global emergency is possible, administrators should consider prioritizing proactive communication with staff members within the building to seek a better understanding of what happens inside the classroom.

Extreme situations can often bring light to many pre-existing issues that need to be addressed, such as unclear or ineffective communication. This is what occurred during COVID-19 within school districts. Primary school teachers faced many long-term external and internal challenges that came to the fore when they transitioned to teaching in-person. Both pre- and post-pandemic, districts and school leaders need to ensure that teachers feel supported and provide opportunities for their voices to be heard. Additionally, administrators need to consider how to prepare for future, non-COVID-19-related events, since virtual instruction can be done at all grade levels. Such preparations may include ensuring every student has access to technology, making sure staff know the procedures and expectations of virtual instruction, and preparing and informing parents on what to expect before virtual instruction occurs.

With this in mind, when drastic change occurs, teachers' experiences and voices should be prioritized when making decisions related to health conditions in the classroom. This recommendation is vital since teachers are able to provide insight into the culture within the building as well as provide a clear view as to the situation among students. The experience of teachers, who were (and are) the recipients of many important health-related messages, need to be taken seriously during the communication and planning process since they are the ones who actively oversee and enforce their students' implementation of guidelines and protocols in the classroom. However, it should also be noted that the burden of keeping students safe does not fall solely on teachers, as external concerns also have an influence on student health. To ensure that all parties are on the same page, there should be clear communication with parents and guardians regarding the expectations for children at home since time spent outside of

school is also vital to keeping a safe environment inside of the school. It is crucial to acknowledge that school-related policies and communication to mitigate the effects of the virus expand outside of the four classroom walls. This recommendation can be useful for other similar considerations for related student concerns, such as the effects of social media on student mental health. For example, schools can teach students about the negative effects of social media and how they should approach establishing healthy boundaries and habits, but the actions of parents and guardians as well as other outside pressures can thwart those efforts.

Additionally, this study provides lessons for effective communication strategies. Certainly there is value in communicating clearly and openly, but this study brings up difficult questions on how much communication is too much and the responsibility of teachers and administrators to reflect to the outside community the reality of the classroom during a health emergency. Given social distancing requirements, email communication of new guidelines was necessary, though the total number of emails might be reconsidered. Administrators might consider providing video conference check-ins for all teachers to ensure educators are on the same page and do not need to rely so heavily on email. Though social media may be giving off a false perception of what happens within a building, administrators often have an expectation to display classroom highlights and celebrate students and teachers. Though this study's findings show that the reality of the in-class experience is often different than what is shown online, administrators remain responsible for checking in with staff in order to ensure that the guidelines are met accordingly. Clear communication and the continuation of high

expectations are therefore difficult goals to achieve given the competing pressures observed during the pandemic.

Teachers would also benefit from the findings of this study since their experiences might be similar to those of the participants. Many of the study participants endured and experienced similar emotions and had similar stories even though they did not know each other and taught in different districts. Teachers should therefore feel confident that their experience–and struggle–is not happening in isolation and that they can take steps to ensure their voice is heard and their valid concerns are addressed. Oftentimes, troubling issues or concerns are likely something that another teacher is feeling or worrying about as well.

Parents expect their children to be in a safe and healthy environment that allows them to learn and grow every school year. In order to ensure this, parents should consider how they might open and maintain helpful and clear communication with teachers. Having this open communication between schools and home will allow for a more successful academic outcome for students in more typical years; having a well-established, healthy relationship during extreme situations, such as a pandemic, is preferable to fostering a relationship of that kind during a time of disruption and trauma. Open communication and cooperation build trust that can last during moments of great difficulty.

Policymakers would also benefit from the results of this study. Due to the rapid changes during the pandemic, policymakers should consider the support systems and health guidelines that are in place prior to the start of another global pandemic, and consider additional differentiation when it comes to health guidelines for younger

populations in schools. It is unrealistic to put broad policies in place for primary-aged students and expect them to be at the same understanding and level of compliance as secondary and college-aged students. Teachers were faced with many communication and implementation challenges during this time, which could have been avoided–or at least mitigated–had there been more clear and tailored preparations made in advance.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations can be used to further this current study in order to provide more information on teachers' perspectives of events that occur within a school building. One recommendation is to conduct a longitudinal study on similar participants of this current study. The information collected during this kind of study would allow researchers to better understand how the emotions and culture of primary school teachers have changed throughout the transition, not only during the post-lockdown period but also today as teachers work through the lasting effects. Teachers could be given the opportunity to share their experiences regarding what has further changed within their classrooms, what styles they found useful during the transition to in-person teaching, what they are still implementing in their classrooms, and what lessons they have learned from the experience. It would also be worth noting if the school culture has improved since the post-lockdown period or if there are still issues that need to be resolved.

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct a comparative study with secondary school teachers. It would be critical for administrators and policymakers to understand the differences between the two learning environments in order to decide how to differentiate any future guidelines and protocols. The data

collected with this future study can be compare with the data found in the current study so that future educators can understand the differences between the two grade levels and the different areas of concerns and needs the opposing grade levels may have. When conducting this future study, it would be useful to gather participants from the same or similar districts (Long Island, New York) in order to be able to do a fair comparison of data.

A third future research study may seek to conduct the same current study, but instead with participants who reside and work outside of New York State. Solely gathering participants from a similar area in three districts that have similar demographics in student and teacher population may skew the collected data. By conducting a study in which the participants are from different areas of the United States with various demographics, researchers will gain a comprehensive look on how primary school teachers felt about teaching in person after the lockdown due to COVID-19. Furthermore, by looking into teachers' perspectives from other states, the data may show if different states were able to handle the pandemic better than others within a primary school building. This information can further help administrators and policymakers create a more comprehensive and realistic set of guidelines and protocols for primary school teachers to follow during an emergency with their students.

A fourth recommendation for future studies is to incorporate the main elements of this current study and increase the number of participants. By increasing the number of participants, future researchers will be able to have more trustworthiness in the data collected. Additionally, more participants will likely result in more opportunities for

unique stories and feelings to be brought up during the discussions, which will lead to a possible conclusion that was not drawn from this current study.

A fifth recommendation for future study is to complete a longitudinal study on the students that were in the participants' classroom or in similar school settings. It would be useful to see how those students are succeeding in school after having an abnormal primary school experience during the pandemic and post-lockdown. The teachers in the current study described how ineffective they felt as educators. Many of the teachers expressed feelings of frustration since they were not able to teach their students imperative social, emotional, and academic skills due to the time consumption and restrictions that the CDC guidelines presented. By doing a longitudinal study on the students, the results may show whether or not there was a lasting effect on the impacted students' academic careers.

Conclusion

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore the perception and experiences of teachers supporting in-person education while adhering to CDC guidelines and regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the data collected–through interviews, focus groups, and artifacts–the conclusion is made that there is a high demand for supporting primary school teachers during a major change in time, especially when it comes to government-mandated guidelines and protocols. Once schools reopened after the lockdown due to COVID-19, primary school teachers were faced with many challenges when implementing CDC guidelines and protocols. Teachers were scared, stressed, confused, frustrated, and isolated during this time period. More support and

understanding of the grade level they teach would have allowed for more ease when making the transition back into the classroom.

By understanding the emotional experiences of primary school teachers, many of whom not only taught in this grade level for years but also were forced to adapt to emerging and frequently changing CDC guidelines, administrators and policymakers can mediate future issues that might occur in the event of additional school closings, transitions to virtual learning, and other unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, when we understand the experiences and feelings of primary school teachers, there will be a better understanding of how primary school students are dealing with the changes in guidelines during the school day.

These issues should be addressed through the various stakeholders in a district. Administrators need to continue to keep a pulse in their buildings and frequently check in with their teachers to ensure that staff feels comfortable with any changes being made, are excited to be at work teaching students, and feel valued as members in the school community. Community leaders and policymakers need to make sure they are able to provide accommodations to teachers who teach the youngest aged students. Guidelines and protocols that are given to high school students should not be the same for primary school students due to the different abilities and understanding of students.

In conclusion, primary school teachers have a great amount of responsibility placed upon them and pressure within their positions. They need to teach their students the foundational skills for their future learning and simultaneously provide appropriate social skills that students will take with them for the rest of their lives. We need to make sure that we are hearing the concerns of our primary school teachers in order to ensure

that they are able to provide effective academic, social, and emotional learning for

students.

Consent Form

Principal Investigator:
Maria Paros
maria.semertzides15@my.stjohns.edu

Purpose:
You are invited to participate in a study exploring the perceptions and experiences of teachers on safety guidelines and protocols, adherence for in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will be conducted by Maria Paros, as part of her doctoral dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Katherine C. Aquino, Ph. D. St. John's University, School of Education, Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership.

Description of Procedures:
Participation is through the completion of one survey. If you are interested in participating, you will only have to participate in one electronic survey. This survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Participation & Confidentiality:
Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss to you. You may terminate your participation at any time. Your responses will be confidential. Only the principal investigator will have access to the information you provide as well as the recorded WebEx sessions. Any information obtained from this study can be used for educational or reporting purposes, but will not identify participants in any way and no identifiable information will be used.

Risks:
There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can skip any questions, which make you uncomfortable. You can also completely withdraw from the study at any point.

Benefits:
There are no direct benefits to participating in this project. However, your participation will help the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership better understand current students' experiences within the program, as well as their future goals as educational leaders.

Compensation:
There is no remuneration for project participation.

Contact Information:
If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact Maria Paros at maria.semertzides15@my.stjohns.edu or her faculty sponsor, Katherine C. Aquino, Ph. D. at czadoaqk@stjohns.edu, Saint John's University, School of Education, Sullivan Hall, Room 522, 800 Utopia Parkway, Queens, New York, 11439.

Statement of Consent:
By signing below, I agree to participate in this project.

_____   _____
Sign Name   Date

_____
Print Name

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the focus group portion of this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers on safety guidelines and protocol adherence for in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keep in mind the following prior to entering the focus group:
● This focus group will be taken place in a WebEx meeting setting.
● The meeting will be recorded for the sole purpose for me to look back on while complying data.
● The focus group will last for approximately 1 hour.
● Your name and any identifying factors will be kept completely confidential.
● Please feel free to express your personal experiences, even if it differs from others in the group.
● Please keep in mind that we need to respect everyone in the group. There are no wrong answers.
● I am going to be facilitating the focus group. Please feel free to communicate with each other and have a genuine discussion about your experiences.
● You have the right to withdrawal from the focus group at any point.

Here are the questions that will be asked by me during the focus group:

1. How has it been to teach in-person post-lockdown from COVID-19?
2. Any specific challenges that you have noted through these past few years since teaching post lockdown?
3. What are the major differences you have noted in your classroom from the in-person teaching pre-lockdown to now post-lockdown?
4. What type of training and/or preparation has your building provided in regards to communicating the CDC COVID-19 safety/health regulations and protocols?
5. How have you changed your classroom procedures in order to meet the needs of the CDC guidelines?
6. Do you feel as though there is something more you could be doing in order to meet the safety and health guidelines from the CDC?
7. Do the changing CDC health and safety regulations affect the way you run your classroom on a daily?
8. Is there anyone in your building that you can go to as a source of support in order to ensure that you are following the CDC regulations and protocols accurately?
9. Has the culture in your building changed since the lockdown?

Thank you again for your participation!

Interview Protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in the focus group portion of this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers on safety guidelines and protocol adherence for in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keep in mind the following prior to entering the focus group:
● This focus group will be taken place in a WebEx meeting setting.
● The meeting will be recorded for the sole purpose for me to look back on while complying data.
● The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes.
● Your name and any identifying factors will be kept completely confidential.
● Please feel free to express your personal experiences.
● You have the right to withdrawal from the interview at any point.

Here are the questions that will be asked by me during the interview:
1. How has it been to teach in-person post-lockdown from COVID-19?
2. Any specific challenges that you have noted through these past few years since teaching post lockdown?
3. What are your feelings towards teaching in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. Do you feel as an effective of a teacher in post-lockdown as you had during pre-lockdown?
5. Do you feel as an effective of a teacher in post-lockdown as you had during pre-lockdown?
6. How do you receive the information about the changing CDC health and safety protocols regulations? Do you feel as though this is the best way to communicate the information?
7. What is the most challenging part of implementing the protocols from the CDC these changes within the classroom setting?
8. Do you feel as though the guidelines and regulations created by the CDC allowed for an environment that ensured health and safety of students and staff members? Why or why not?
9. Did you receive any support from the district or state level in order to feel comfortable in implementing the safety protocols?
10. What are the biggest differences from teaching in-person pre-lockdown and post-lockdown?
11. Do you feel as though your building as a whole have adapted their teaching methods to meet the needs of the CDC guidelines effectively? Why or why not?

Thank you again for your participation!

Sample Recruitment Email

Good Morning,

Thank you for participating my study that will explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers on safety guidelines and protocol adherence for in-person teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Your participation is completely voluntary, and answers will be handled confidentially. You can choose not to participate or skip any question without penalty or loss of benefits. No person will be identified individually in any verbal or written report, including reports and publications. Please take note of the Consent Form attached to this email, which will provide you with a more detailed description of your rights in participating in this study. After reading the consent form, please sign and return the Consent Form via email to maria.semertzides15@my.stjohns.edu.

I appreciate your time in participating in this study. I appreciate your help in providing information that can be used for improving leadership practices and to better support teachers in the future during a challenging year of change. Your contribution is critical. If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully,
Maria Paros

REFERENCES

Adigüzel, O. C., Dalioglu, S. T., & Ergünay, O. (2017). An Investigation of 21st Century

Primary Schools' Functions According to Primary School Teachers'

Views. *Egitim Ve Bilim*, 42(189)

https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/investigation-21st-century-primary-schools/docview/1879020431/se-

2?accountid=14068

Alexander, R. C. (2009). Fostering student engagement in history through student-created

digital media: A qualitative and quantitative study of student engagement and

learning outcomes in 6th-grade history instruction (Order No. 3400850).

Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (305011857).

https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-

theses/fostering-student-engagement-history-through/docview/305011857/se-

2?accountid=14068

Anderson, T. C. (2020). Academics, Achievement Gap, and Nutritional Health: The

Impact of Coronavirus on Education. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 87(1), 14-17.

https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/academics-achievement-gap-nutritional-health/docview/2457214568/se-

2?accountid=14068

Ayenigbara, I. O., Adeleke, O. R., Ayenigbara, G. O., Adegboro, J. S., & Olofintuyi, O.

O. (2020). COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic: fears, facts and preventive

measures. *Germs*, 10(3), 218-228.

https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/covid-19-sars-cov-2-pandemic-fears-facts/docview/2444522545/se-2

Azimi, P., Keshavarz, Z., Jose Guillermo Cedeno, C. L., & Allen, J. G. (2020). Estimating the nationwide transmission risk of measles in US schools and impacts of vaccination and supplemental infection control strategies. *BMC Infectious Diseases*, 20, 1-22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12879-020-05200-6

Bach, H. K., Cornelia, B., Margie, D., Sunstein Cass, R., Böhm, R., Armin, F., Brewer, N. T., Omer, S. B., Scherzer, M., Sunita, S., Fischer, E. F., Scheel, A. E., Daisy, F., Shinobu, K., Dubé, E., Leask, J., Dutta, M., MacDonald, N. E., Anna, T., . . . Butler, R. (2020). Ten considerations for effectively managing the COVID-19 transition. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4(7), 677-687. http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0906-x

Bao, X., Qu, H., Zhang, R., & Hogan, T. P. (2020). Modeling Reading Ability Gain in Kindergarten Children during COVID-19 School Closures. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(17), 6371. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17176371

Benjamin, G. C. (2019, February 21). *Lessons from ebola: How schools can stay healthy (opinion)*. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-lessons-from-ebola-how-schools-can-stay-healthy/2014/11

Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1998). Children's interpersonal behaviors and the teacher-child relationship. *Developmental Psychology*, 34(5), 934-946. https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/childrens-interpersonal-behaviors-teacher-child/docview/224543265/se-2?accountid=14068

Carter, C. P., Reschly, A. L., Lovelace, M. D., Appleton, J. J., & Thompson, D. (2012). Measuring student engagement among elementary students: Pilot of the Student Engagement Instrument - Elementary Version. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(2), 61. https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/measuring-student-engagement-among-elementary/docview/1024414629/se-2?accountid=14068

Chen, X., McCormick, E. M., Ravindran, N., McElwain, N. L., & Telzer, E. H. (2020). Maternal Emotion Socialization in Early Childhood Predicts Adolescents' Amygdala-vmPFC Functional Connectivity to Emotion Faces. Developmental Psychology, 56(3), 503. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dev0000852

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Sage Publications.

Denham, S. A., Bassett, H. H., & Miller, S. L. (2017). Early Childhood Teachers' Socialization of Emotion: Contextual and Individual Contributors. *Child & Youth Care Forum,* 46(6), 805-824. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10566-017-9409-y

Donaldson, M. (2020). Tools to Build Their Best Learning: Examining How Kindergarten Teachers Frame Student Mistakes. *Harvard Educational Review,* 90(1), 54-74,159. https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/tools-build-their-best-learning-examining-how/docview/2430673507/se-2?accountid=14068

Fullerton, N. (2021). *Instagram vs. reality: The pandemic's impact on social media and mental health*. Penn Medicine. https://www.pennmedicine.org/news/news-blog/2021/april/instagram-vs-reality-the-pandemics-impact-on-social-media-and-mental-health

Gupta, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2020). Future time perspective and group performance among students: Role of student engagement and group cohesion. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education,* 12(5), 1265-1280. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-05-2019-0128

Hallas, Donna, PHD, PPCNP-BC, CPNP, PMHS,F.A.A.N.P., F.A.A.N., Spratling, Regena, PHD, RN, APRN,C.P.N.P., F.A.A.N.P., & Cupelli, Emily T, DNP,C.P.N.P., B.C.B.-P.M.D. (2020). PART 1 Safe return to school: a call to action. *Contemporary Pediatrics*, 37(8), 16-21. https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/part-1-safe-return-school-call-action/docview/2439671475/se-2?accountid=14068

Hernández, M. M., Eisenberg, N., Valiente, C., VanSchyndel, S. K., Spinrad, T. L., Silva, K. M., Berger, R. H., Diaz, A., Terrell, N., Thompson, M. S., & Southworth, J. (2016). Emotional expression in school context, social relationships, and academic adjustment in kindergarten. *Emotion*, 16(4), 553-566. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/emo0000147

Herold, B. (2022, March 29). *How schools survived two years of covid-19*. Education

Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-

learning/how-schools-survived-two-years-of-covid-19/2022/03

Heubeck, E. (2020, December 9). *The scramble to find substitute teachers*. Education

Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-

scramble-to-find-substitute-teachers/2020/10

Heubeck, E. (2020, November 12). *What schools are (and aren't) doing to support

teachers worried about safety of in-person learning*. Education Week. Retrieved

April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/what-schools-

are-and-arent-doing-to-support-teachers-worried-about-safety-of-in-person-

learning/2020/11

Heubeck, E. (2022, January 31). *What teachers who might quit are really thinking*.

Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-teachers-who-might-quit-are-really-

thinking/2021/10

Hinton, M. (2020, December 8). *New Rhode Island Law Mandates Daily School recess,

calls it a student's right*. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/new-rhode-island-law-mandates-daily-school-

recess-calls-it-a-students-right/2016/07

Jhun, I., Gaffin, J. M., Coull, B. A., Huffaker, M. F., Petty, C. R., Sheehan, W. J., Baxi,

S. N., Lai, P. S., Kang, C., Wolfson, J. M., Gold, D. R., Koutrakis, P., &

Phipatanakul, W. (2017). School Environmental Intervention to Reduce

Particulate Pollutant Exposures for Children with Asthma. *Journal of Allergy and*

Clinical Immunology.in Practice, 5(1), 154-159.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaip.2016.07.018

Kinsey, E. W., PhD., Hecht, A. A., PhD., Dunn, C. G., PhD., Levi, R., M.P.H., Read, M.

A., Ma, Smith, C., M.P.P., Niesen, P., Seligman, H. K.,M.D.M.A.S., & Hager, E.

R., PhD. (2020). School Closures During COVID-19: Opportunities for

Innovation in Meal Service. *American Journal of Public Health*, 110(11), 1635-

1643. http://dx.doi.org/10.2W5/AJPH.2020.305875

Klein, A. (2020, November 29). *Flexible seating: Collaboration catalyst or classroom*

disaster? Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/flexible-seating-collaboration-catalyst-

or-classroom-disaster/2020/01

Kurtz, H. (2020, December 2). *In-person learning expands, student absences up, teachers*

work longer, survey shows. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/in-person-learning-expands-student-absences-

up-teachers-work-longer-survey-shows/2020/10

Kurtz, H. (2020, December 4). *National survey tracks impact of Coronavirus on schools:*

10 key findings. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-

coronavirus-on-schools-10-key-findings/2020/04

Lieberman, M. (2020, December 3). *Many districts won't be ready for remote learning if*

coronavirus closes schools. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

https://www.edweek.org/leadership/many-districts-wont-be-ready-for-remote-

learning-if-coronavirus-closes-schools/2020/03

Mannathoko, M. C. (2019). Health and Safety Concerns in Art and Design Primary

    School Classrooms in Botswana: Reflections on the Art and Design Module. *Art*

    Education, 72(6), 20-24.

    https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

    journals/health-safety-concerns-art-design-primary-

    school/docview/2307371551/se-2?accountid=14068

Martinez, M., & Teale, W. H. (1988). Reading in a Kindergarten Classroom Library.The

    Reading Teacher, 41(6), 568.

    https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

    journals/reading-kindergarten-classroom-library/docview/203264646/se-

    2?accountid=14068

Mirahmadizadeh, A., Ranjbar, K., Shahriarirad, R., Erfani, A., Ghaem, H., Jafari, K., &

    Rahimi, T. (2020). Evaluation of students' attitude and emotions towards the

    sudden closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional

    study. *BMC Psychology*, 8, 1-7. http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s40359-020-00500-7

Mongeau, L. (2020, November 28). *In N.C. District, leader brings play back to*

    kindergarten. EdWeek Leaders To Learn From. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

    https://www.edweek.org/leaders/2016/in-n-c-district-leader-brings-play-back-to-

    kindergarten

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Muge, C., & Marc, L. (2020). Reopening Primary Schools during the Pandemic. *The New*

    England Journal of Medicine, 383(10), 981-985.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1056/NEJMms2024920

Najarro, I. (2021, September 22). *Covid protocols keep changing. here's how schools can keep parents in the know*. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/covid-protocols-keep-changing-heres-how-schools-can-keep-parents-in-the-know/2021/09

New York State Education Department (NYSED) Data Site. (2018). Retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=school

Omary, M. B., Eswaraka, J., Kimball, S. D., Moghe, P. V., Panettieri,Reynold A.,,Jr, & Scotto, K. W. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and research shutdown: staying safe and productive. *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 130(6), 2745-2748. http://dx.doi.org/10.1172/JCI138646

Phelps, C., & Sperry, L. L. (2020). Children and the COVID-19 pandemic.Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 12, S73-S75. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000861

Robinson, L. R., Leeb, R. T., Merrick, M. T., & Forbes, L. W. (2016). Conceptualizing and Measuring Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments in Educational Settings. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(5), 1488-1504. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0332-2

Roorda, D. L., Suzanne, J., Marjolein, Z., Oort, F. J., & Koomen Helma M. Y. (2017). Affective Teacher–Student Relationships and Students' Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Update and Test of the Mediating Role of Engagement. *School Psychology Review*, 46(3), 239-261. http://dx.doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0035.V46-3

Rubin, R., M.A. (2020). School Superintendents Confront COVID-19-"There Are No

    Good Options for Next Year": *The Journal of the American Medical*

    Association.Jama, 324(6), 534. http://dx.doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.12575

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Samuels, C. A. (2020, December 1). *Schools, health officials eye mumps outbreak*.

    Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

    https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-health-officials-eye-mumps-

    outbreak/2006/05

Schein, E. H. (2017). *Organizational culture and leadership.* 458

Schwartz, S. (2020, December 10). *Classroom routines must change. here's what*

    teaching looks like under covid-19. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022,

    from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/classroom-routines-must-change-

    heres-what-teaching-looks-like-under-covid-19/2020/08

Schwartz, S. (2020, November 20). *Teachers scramble to make remote learning work:*

    'it's very stressful'. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

    https://www.edweek.org/leadership/teachers-scramble-to-make-remote-learning-

    work-its-very-stressful/2020/03

Sparks, S. D. (2020, November 20). *Preschool lessons in fairness may last a long time,*

    study finds. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

    https://www.edweek.org/leadership/preschool-lessons-in-fairness-may-last-a-

    long-time-study-finds/2018/11

Sparks, S. D. (2021, September 17). *Why teacher-student relationships matter*. Education

    Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-

    learning/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter/2019/03

Sparks, S. D. (2022, April 14). *Students are behaving badly in class. excessive screen*

    time might be to blame. Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from

    https://www.edweek.org/leadership/students-are-behaving-badly-in-class-

    excessive-screen-time-might-be-to-blame/2022/04

Sunita, M. (2020). Education in the Era of COVID-19: Innovative Solutions to Real

    Challenges. *The Educational Review, USA*, 4(11), 193-198.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.26855/er.2020.11.002

Swartz, D. L. (2017). Social Order: Children's Elementary Perceptions: *European*

    Journal of Sociology. Archives Européennes De Sociologie, 58(3), 567-576.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S000397561700039X

Thakar, V. (2020). Unfolding Events in Space and Time: Geospatial Insights into

    COVID-19 Diffusion in Washington State during the Initial Stage of the

    Outbreak. *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information*, 9(6), 382.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/ijgi9060382

Trahern (TW) Jones of Pediatric Infectious Diseases Instructor of Pediatrics of Utah

    Health,Lake City, & Danielle Nahal Resident Physician Medical,Center

    Francisco. (2020). Beating the Pandemic: What Emergency Providers Should

    Know About COVID-19. *Pediatric Emergency Medicine Reports*, 25(5)

    https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-

journals/beating-pandemic-what-emergency-providers-
should/docview/2388680456/se-2?accountid=14068

Viner, R. M., Bonell, C., Drake, L., Jourdan, D., Davies, N., Baltag, V., Jerrim, J.,
Proimos, J., & Darzi, A. (2021). Reopening schools during the COVID-19
pandemic: governments must balance the uncertainty and risks of reopening
schools against the clear harms associated with prolonged closure. *Archives of
Disease in Childhood,* 106(2), 111-113. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-
2020-319963

Wake, A. D. (2020). Knowledge, Attitude, Practice, and Associated Factors Regarding
the Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic. *Infection and Drug
Resistance,* 13, 3817-3832. http://dx.doi.org/10.2147/IDR.S275689

Will, M. (2020, December 10). *The Socially Distanced School Day*. Education Week.
Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-socially-
distanced-school-day/2020/06

Will, M. (2021, December 22). *Teachers are not ok, even though we need them to be*.
Education Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from
https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-are-not-ok-even-though-we-
need-them-to-be/2021/09

Will, M. (2021, December 24). *The Teaching Profession in 2021 (in charts)*. Education
Week. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-
learning/the-teaching-profession-in-2021-in-charts/2021/12

Yifat, R., & Zadunaisky-Ehrlich, S. (2008). Teachers' Talk in Preschools During Circle
Time: The Case of Revoicing: JRCE. *Journal of Research in Childhood*

Education, 23(2), 211-226.

https://jerome.stjohns.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-

journals/teachers-talk-preschools-during-circle-time-case/docview/203865440/se-

2?accountid=14068

Vita

Name	*Maria Paros*
Baccalaureate Degree	*Bachelor of Science,* *St. Joseph's College, Patchogue,* *Major: Childhood Education*
Date Graduated	*May, 2013*
Other Degrees and Certificates	*Master of Art,* *St. Joseph's College, Patchogue,* *Major: Literacy and Cognition*
Date Graduated	*May, 2015*
	Advanced Certificate in *Students with Disabilities (2016)*
	Advanced Certificate in Educational *Administration (2017)*