

EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENT OUTCOMES

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## ABSTRACT

Individual experiences inform psychological adjustment, academic achievement, and trait-specific behaviors during adolescence. The formation of their identity is further dependent upon social and emotional interactions such as those experienced in the social learning environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mandated social distancing resulted in the closure of public schools state-wide, forcing students and educators to utilize online educational environments with no preparatory or transitional periods to allow for adequate adjustment. It is necessary to assess and work toward an understanding of the consequences of this environmental shift, and of the adolescents' modified social interactions. This descriptive qualitative phenomenological study explores the experiences of eight Washington state public school educators. Each of the participants experienced teaching online during the pandemic and have since returned to the traditional classroom environment. The study utilized semi-structured one-to-one interviews to discuss their classroom environment and the observed social and emotional development of their students. Data collection and analysis followed the principles of phenomenological research, exploring patterns regarding the described shared experiences of public educators following periods of mandated online learning. Three themes and nine subthemes emerged describing the experiences of public educators in Washington state. Two themes described how participants experienced the transition from online learning environments to the traditional learning environment, including a loss of authority and a lack of structure in the educational environment. The third theme described how educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students, noting a significant decline in the mental health of students.

*Keywords:* adolescence, social development, emotional development, online learning, social environments, digital environments

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## **Dedication**

To my dissertation chair, who has consistently provided encouragement alongside academic guidance. To my dissertation committee, who have contributed their time and expertise toward my doctoral achievement. To my family and friends who have demonstrated their unconditional support time and time again. To my children who have joyfully celebrated my academic milestones alongside their own. To my husband who remains attentive and supportive, encouraging me to chase after my dreams.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

This study examines the feasibility of meeting the standards of public education regarding social and emotional development as set forth by the nationally recognized Common Core State Standards (CCSS) within an online learning environment. Specifically, the research explores how public educators have experienced the face-to-face learning environment following a period of mandated online learning, with respect to the social and emotional development of their students.

Public education falls under the guidance of each state, with a general directive toward establishing consistency in education nationwide. Supporting this objective, which is intended to standardize education, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) demonstrate the necessity of centralized ideas in curricula. Each state further regulates the specified learning standards and instructional materials which are required for implementation in primary and secondary public education. These learning standards include measures of both academic performance and social emotional development.

The correlational data referenced in standardized models of education does not explain the relationship between variables of social and emotional development and academic achievement, or the mediated effects of either regarding the educational environment. Study regarding common core measures of academic achievement and social and emotional development measures only directional effects between variables. Furthermore, these studies do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the antecedents or predictive variables which mediate or moderate the relationship between the measured variables.

There is a significant gap in the research regarding the appropriate modification and implementation of educational curricula and promotion of social and emotional development in an online environment. This gap limits the ability to thoroughly identify or understand adolescent needs related to appropriate academic and social-emotional progress in an online environment. Consequentially, this may increase the risk of deficits regarding adolescent development and may impact adolescent social determinants of health. The current study looks to public educators to further qualify their perspective and experiences in working with adolescents both online and in the traditional classroom setting to build an understanding of the social and emotional impacts they have observed.

### **Background**

Though the development and formal review of educational requirements are the duty of the superintendent of public instruction of each state, the standardized model utilizes a collaborative and public process to identify and assign necessary measures. This process invites educators, community members and parents or guardians to participate in building the key components regarding the goals of the educational system.

The following is a sample of identified learning goals provided by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State. This sample provides the academic foundation for public education which each state participating in the Core Curricula model of education must aspire to meet:

1. Read with comprehension, write effectively, and communicate successfully in a variety of ways and settings and with a variety of audiences;

2. Know and apply the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical, and life sciences; civics and history, including different cultures and participation in representative government; geography; arts; and health and fitness;
3. Think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate technology literacy and fluency as well as different experiences and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems; and
4. Understand the importance of work and finance and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect future career and educational opportunities.

Meeting these foundational academic goals within multiple modalities or environments requires that these standards are reflected in both the design and the implementation of the primary and secondary curriculum (Dilling et al., 2020). Educators and their selected curricula must additionally address the diverse needs of students. Shearer et al. (2020) establish the need for an eclectic pedagogical approach to personalize adaptive learning experiences; alongside collaborative and connected online learning experiences. Through authenticity and adequate delivery of curricula, instructors can build upon and enhance individual student learning experiences (Dilling et al., 2020).

Positive student outcomes rely upon course design and curricula which reflects clarity, relevance, and academic integrity (Purarjomandlangrudi et al., 2019). Social emotional development has further been identified as a necessary construct of adaptive information processing regarding positive student outcomes (Blakemore, 2018). In such, appropriate models of education address academic performance as well as student needs related to psychological safety, responsiveness, and support.

Alongside the adopted Common Core State Standards of academic performance, public education models employ social emotional learning standards. The Social Emotional Learning Indicators Workgroup (2016) has developed the framework that provides educators with working definitions and developmental reference to the required social emotional standards of the classroom. These social emotional learning standards include self-awareness, self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, social management, and social engagement. Educators are provided with the indicators and benchmarks relevant to each standard (see Appendix A), however they are individually tasked with selecting and implementing the teaching strategies which support these parameters within their classrooms. Educators are further responsible for identifying and monitoring their students' progress toward meeting these social emotional standards; as the principles of social emotional development, appropriate, responsive, universal, and trauma-informed instruction for each child, guides the implementation of core curricula.

### **Self-awareness And Social Awareness**

There is a positive association between student outcomes and the immediacy of communication or interaction between students and instructors (Tanis, 2020). Educators can utilize activities centered around peer interaction, opportunities for student moderated discussion or debate, and collaborative group projects to promote student outcomes related to self-awareness and social awareness within the online classroom (Bollinger & Halupa, 2018).

Given the increased capacity for abstract thought and metacognitive ability in primary and secondary students, self-discovery becomes part of the information processing system (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Social interactions, learning environments, and social emotional functionality of the developing brain influence the beliefs and behaviors of the student (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

As the adolescent works to identify their sense of self and associated beliefs within their social environment, they are also met with the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Christians receive spiritual gifts and the favor of God through the workings of the Holy Spirit. The adolescents' expanding sense of authority and infinite potential is the result of these workings, as God places no limit on the Holy Spirit (John 3:34, ESV). Even as children, the ability to comprehend and use knowledge wisely is received through an intrinsic knowing of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). Educators can honor this relationship, even in a public-school setting, through activities and discussions which encourage students to embrace their natural curiosity and longing for connection.

### **Self-management And Social Management**

Adolescence is noted as a developmental stage of heightened social sensitivity (Tamnes et al., 2017). Thematic analysis of student concerns in relation to feedback and course assessment demonstrate that frequent and timely feedback is a significant indicator of positive student outcomes. Lynam and Cachia (2018) demonstrate the necessity of immediate feedback in meeting self-management and social management standards that promote academic maturity, and in turn reduce stress related to online learning.

During adolescence, the social brain is active and enduring rapid change (Hewston et al., 2002). However, in comparing multiple learning environments, Dilling, et al. (2020) discuss student reports regarding the severity of isolation and experienced disconnection within the online learning environment. Good and Willoughby (2008) further note the complexity of managing the adolescent social self in relation to identity achievement, spiritual development, and moral development.

Within the framework of spiritual and moral development, Christians are asked to engage their peers, warning the idle and encouraging the disheartened (1 Thessalonians 5:14, ESV). Those who are positioned to teach must also honor this framework, demonstrating dignity and modeling good works (Titus 2:7, ESV). Educators are well equipped, if willing, to promote self-efficacy and social engagement in ensuring that all communication, feedback and interactions with students exemplify these expectations of the Lord.

### **Self-efficacy And Social Engagement**

Student outcomes associated with self-efficacy and social engagement are positively correlated with student perceptions of online course content and delivery (Wei & Chou, 2020). Furthermore, these outcomes are consistent with factors related to the level of motivation and sense of control experienced by the online learner. Li et al. (2020) discuss social emotional standards of self-efficacy as outcomes which are moderated by instructor feedback and engagement.

Each of the previously identified social and emotional standards include environmental conditions for learning such as provision of a nurturing setting and opportunity to practice social skills in a variety of settings. Prior research (Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019; Wei & Chou, 2020) offers context describing conditions related to online learning environments and the factors which contribute to the student experience and outcomes. Social emotional factors found to contribute most to student outcomes included level of participation, student interaction, social engagement and the design and delivery of curricula (Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019). Little research has been conducted to-date regarding how educators experience addressing these social and emotional factors in transitioning from a traditional classroom to an online educational setting.



Still, in the absence of empirical data, God's Word clarifies the necessity of social and emotional factors. God intended for His people to be socially engaged at all stages of development, offering support and a sense of community amongst one another. Social responsibility and self-efficacy, within the framework of Christian values, allows the adolescent to identify those who share similar values, creating a community of believers and providing a sense of fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7, ESV).

### **Problem Statement**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing mandates, public-school districts across the nation temporarily adopted methods of online learning which served as the primary source of education during the pandemic. These methods included the individual instructors' efforts to digitized previously structured components of the standardized curricula, making the materials accessible to all students across various online platforms. Though outcomes related to this sudden wide-spread shift in online learning have not yet been assessed, previous study of online education demonstrates the impact of both the design and the appropriate delivery of educational content (Purarjomandlangrudi & Chen, 2019; Wei & Chou, 2020). In modifying the delivery of the common core learning model, the potential impact on student outcomes regarding consistency of both academic and social emotional standards required within Washington state's public-school setting is not yet known.

The transformation of the public-school setting from a face-to-face environment to an online environment, was implemented with no established prerequisite or evaluation of educators' competency or experience in teaching remotely. Subsequently, there is little research available as to the effectiveness of these modifications within the public-school setting. In such, it is necessary to acknowledge prior study which indicates a positive relationship between

student outcomes and utility of standardized educational models (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), while also recognizing the lack of evidence-based standards set forth regarding the design and delivery of standardized education specific to an online learning environment.

The current study explores how educators have experienced student outcomes regarding the capacity to meet social emotional learning standards in an online classroom setting. Student outcomes are annually measured in relation to academic performance, as determined by the constructs of standardized testing. Alternatively, student outcomes measured in relation to social-emotional development is defined and described by educators. Findings from this descriptive qualitative phenomenological study contribute to our understanding of the educators' perspectives and experiences regarding students' social-emotional development resulting from the transition between online and face-to-face instruction. The findings from this study further provide insight regarding emerging changes in academic outcomes and social determinants of health, validating the previously established correlation between social-emotional development and academic performance, while building upon an understanding of environmental impacts regarding adolescent social-emotional development.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how educators have experienced students' social and emotional development following mandated online learning environments. Recent study has assessed the self-reported social emotional state of adolescents who have opted into an online learning environment (Bollinger & Halupa, 2018; Henritius et al., 2019), as well as outcomes regarding adverse social environments and interactions during adolescence (Allen et al., 2006). Still, research which offers a progressive evaluation of adolescent social and emotional states in a mandated online educational

environment remains incomplete. Even in study of participants who have elected to attend courses online, students actively participating in an online classroom continue to report higher levels of isolation and disconnectedness (Bollinger & Halupa, 2018). Yet again, research provides limited data regarding the moderating factors of the classroom environment which have impacted these social and emotional variables. Research must guide the revision of course content to evoke participation, interaction and engagement, while addressing appropriate implementation of course material to meet student needs as they relate to academic achievement and social emotional development.

Findings from the current study provide an additional understanding regarding phenomena related to social and emotional development, skewed academic performance and deficits in adolescent social determinants of health during the social distancing mandates. Findings can further be utilized in contributing to the facilitation of necessary updates in the development of instructional materials and implementation of online teaching strategies to enhance student outcomes.

### **Research Question(s) and Hypotheses**

It is not known how educators perceive or experience the impacts of an online learning environment as it relates to the expected or required social and emotional development of their students. While studies have shown that student-centered learning models enhance student motivation and contribute to effective learning outcomes in an online environment (Regmi & Jones, 2020), the constructive application of student-centered models in an online learning environment requires an assessment of instructors' attitude, aptitude and needs, incorporating meaning and the opportunity to collaborate effectively with other instructors (Scoppio & Luyt,

2017). Research has not yet demonstrated an understanding of the relationship between social distancing in education and these collaborative efforts amongst educators.

Previous research also looks to variables such as the educational environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) and the pace of curricula implementation (Andriette & Su, 2018) to establish a relationship between the educational model and student outcomes. While Li, et al. (2020) demonstrate a positive correlation between academic achievement and student-instructor relationships regarding accessibility and feedback, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the impact of these variables on social and emotional outcomes within an online classroom.

Prior study has confirmed that social emotional factors contribute to student outcomes, specifically regarding participation, perception and student interaction or engagement. While student perception has been shown to influence self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication (Wei & Chou, 2020), direct communication and interaction between students and instructors has been shown to influence student outcomes regarding academic achievement and social emotional development (Tanis, 2020). The current descriptive qualitative phenomenological study explores the experiences of educators in respect to the observed social and emotional variables of adolescent students in a traditional classroom setting following participation in a mandated online classroom environment.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments.

RQ 2: How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in an online classroom environment.

### **Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

The study assumed that a purposeful sampling strategy, with a back-up snowball sampling strategy would produce a reasonably homogeneous sample of participants who are public educators and have experience teaching in both the traditional face-to-face classroom and in the online classroom. Purposeful criterion sampling allows researchers to identify and select only participants with lived experience regarding the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling method uses the participant criterion to narrow the selection of participants to those who appropriately represent the goals of the study (Byrne, 2001). The back-up snowball sampling strategy further allows researchers to recruit participants through a series of referrals from other participants or other relevant contacts rather than attempting to contact potential participants directly (Parker et al., 2019). This sampling strategy is particularly appropriate when the researcher does not have reasonable access to the population being studied (Wohl et al., 2017).

The study assumed that a sample size of 7-12 participants would be adequate for the descriptive qualitative phenomenological study. In selecting the sample size of participants for a qualitative study, the researcher must consider the goals and purpose of the study as well as the diversity of the sample in exploring the commonality of their lived experience. Morse (2000) advises researchers to further consider the quality of the data being collected as well as the expected volume of data collected from each participant in determining the amount of useable data needed for the study. While Stark and Trinidad (2007) suggest a smaller sample size of 1-10

participants for phenomenological study, Boddy (2016) suggest that a homogeneous sample size of up to 12 may be more practical in qualitative study.

The study assumed the researcher would collect enough relevant data to reach data saturation. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the concept of data saturation in qualitative research refers to the point in data collection when no new data is found. While Guest et al. (2006) confirm data saturation to be the “*gold standard*” in qualitative research, van Manen (2014) reminds researchers that saturation is not the primary objective of a phenomenological study. Rather, phenomenological study should aim to collect an accurate and comprehensive description of lived experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied (Boddy, 2016).

The study assumed the researcher would develop an appropriate and comprehensive set of semi-structured interview questions, with an appropriate protocol for the use of clarifying follow-up questions. The advantage of using a semi-structured one-to-one interview method for the study is the researcher’s ability to interact directly with the participant (Galletta, 2012). Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To be effective for data collection, the researcher is tasked with completing significant research within the field of study prior to conducting participant interviews (Kelly, 2010), further allowing the researcher to determine the specific set of questions which will be used for the semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The study assumed participants would provide an accurate account of their experiences. Qualitative research gives participants a voice regarding topics or experiences that interest them and provide meaning in their lives (Reeves et al., 2015). Researchers can promote open and

honest communication during data collection by offering participants the opportunity to reflect and share about the experiences which are of meaning to them (Nizza et al., 2021).

The study assumed the researcher's ability to exercise appropriate bracketing or neutrality of their own beliefs and biases throughout the study. The researcher's sociocultural position has the ability to impact the purpose, design and outcomes of research (Reeves et al., 2015). The researcher must bracket their own beliefs and biases to reduce the risk of incorporating the researcher's own assumptions in the interpretation of the data (Malterud, 2001).

The researcher acknowledges a series of limitations regarding the research design of the study. Limitations are generally associated with the constructs of a research design which are out of the researcher's control yet affect the design or results of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019).

One limitation of the study was limited external validity. The concept of generalizability in qualitative study has been noted in terms of limited feasibility as compared to that of quantitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). While researchers can utilize random sampling strategies to enhance external validity in quantitative study, sampling strategies have less of an impact on external validity in qualitative research (Malterud, 2001). Instead, the researcher must accommodate the reviewers' perspective with utilization of appropriate methods of phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2010).

Another limitation of the study was the use of recorded video conferencing for data collection using semi-structured one-to-one interviews. All data collection procedures, including the semi-structured interview can influence the results of the study (Gibbs et al., 2007). Using a web-based video conferencing platform rather than a face-to-face venue for interviewing

participants had the potential to limit participation due to concerns related to internet access or due to the user's competence in access or utilizing the platform (Archibald et al., 2019).

Another limitation of the study was the use of social media for initiating a call for participation and the associated risk of participant privacy or confidentiality violations. While the participant call specified that participants must not further contact the researcher through any social media post, any use of social media increases the risk of ethical violations related to confidentiality and participant privacy (Smith et al., 1996; Zimmer, 2010). The researcher acknowledges that they were unable to substantially control the parameters of user privacy, as social media users are subject to the terms and conditions specific to the social media platforms which they subscribe to (Hunter et al., 2018). In such, the researcher exercised every precaution at the extent possible to guard confidentiality throughout all steps of the research process.

Another limitation of the study was the researcher's lack of experience regarding data collection as it relates to reaching data saturation. The concept of saturation is discussed as a verification strategy of both validity and reliability in qualitative study, which Morse, et al. (2002) advise is the responsibility of the researcher. However, Boddy (2016) states that there is confusion and a clear gap in the theoretical expectation and practice of achieving saturation in qualitative research. Bowen (2008) further warns of the challenges novice researchers face in regard to achieving data saturation in qualitative study, primarily due to inconsistencies in the literature as it relates to guidelines or procedures for determining saturation.

While certain constructs of the research design posed limitations which were outside of the researcher's control, a series of delimitations were intentionally assigned to support the purpose of the study. Delimitations are boundaries or limitations which were intentionally set by the researcher to maintain the objectives of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019).



One delimitation of the study was the use of descriptive qualitative phenomenological methodology. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of educators who have transitioned between an online and traditional learning environment during and following mandated social distancing in relation to the observed social and emotional development of their students. While previous studies have looked to quantitative methodology to establish an understanding the ideal learning environment (Emery & Anderman, 2020), more recent literature supports the use of qualitative research when exploring the complexities of social phenomenon (Nolen, 2020).

Another delimitation of the study was the participant criterion which had to be met in order to qualify for participation in the study. Participants were required to have a minimum of five years teaching experience in a public education environment, including experience teaching in both the online and traditional learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This requirement ensured that public educators had lived experience teaching in each environment and had directly experienced the phenomenon being studied, allowing the data regarding their shared experiences to lead to a relevant and focused interpretation of how the phenomenon has been experienced (Morse et al., 2002). Had the researcher been unable to recruit an adequate sample size of participants who met the criterion of the study, the researcher was prepared to conduct a re-sampling with the criterion reduced to experience teaching both online and in the traditional classroom without the required five years of professional experience (Palinkas et al., 2015).

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

Sociocultural theory guides this study in offering foundational constructs related to understanding phenomena consistent with adolescent activities of social engagement and

learning. Merging sociocultural concepts of human development and education, Lee Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1934, 1978/1987) references the appropriate implementation of guided social and emotional instruction during adolescence (Wass & Golding, 2014). Vygotsky's theories are adopted from study of human development regarding cognitive function, the social origins of cognitive functioning and the mediating role of social interaction (Eun, 2019).

Vygotsky's theory incorporates early psychological concepts regarding human development and individual processing. His theoretic constructs lend from previous study such as Ivan Sechenov's theory of central inhibition (Veresov, 1999) and Pierre Janet's law of sociogenesis (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Expanding upon these social origins of cognitive processes, the Zone of Proximal Development theory addresses the cognitive and emotional processes specific to those which occur during social interaction (Eun, 2019).

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory further associates the constructs of development and social interaction to provide a framework for both learning and teaching. The theory describes activity occurring within the proximal zone in regard to its potential to become internalized. Specifically, when active processing and negotiation of concepts allow collaborative participation, the learner is then able to become an independent user of the knowledge obtained (Eun, 2019).

As educators, it is necessary to both challenge the capacity of the learner and provide the necessary support to assist them. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory suggests that it is the increased capability of peers or teachers to assist in the learning process that in turn enables the learner to advance and utilize acquired skills independently (Wass & Golding, 2014). Furthermore, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory is built upon the concept of

assisted learning; without the assistance of a more capable individual (teacher), the less capable individual (learner) is not able to meet their developmental potential (Wass & Golding, 2014).

Contemporary study in the field of sociocultural psychology also includes that of construal-level theory (CLT) in assessing the impact of proximity as it relates to an individual's emotional and executive regulation (Trope et al., 2021). Construal-level Theory aims to define psychological constructs regarding judgement and behavior as a social function of proximity, identifying moderating factors specific to the social setting (Trope et al., 2021) referencing outcome-based measures, for example, the actionable steps toward goal attainment.

Mandated social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes regarding the learning environment, namely in transitioning to an online only educational environment. Significant changes such as these have the potential to disrupt the adolescents' necessary and customary social processes such as social support and daily interaction with peers (Morroquin et al., 2020). Understanding the social and emotional deficits resulting from the online educational environment requires consideration of the age-appropriate social adaptations which have been interrupted. During adolescence, the developing self-concept is dependent upon a social comparison process in which the adolescent engages in comparing their own skills, values and traits to those of their peers (Berk, 2019). Within this process of social comparison, the adolescent seeks acceptance from their peers as they begin to form an identity within their social network (Harter, 2012).

This study further draws upon educational theories, with reference to student-centered models of learning, though necessary adaptations between traditional and online environments have not yet been identified within these student-centered models of education (Regmi & Jones, 2020). In evaluating individual experiences and perceptions in online education, research can

provide an understanding of what works in meeting the individual needs of students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020), however a significant gap remains regarding the assessment of educators' facilitation and implementation strategies, and how these strategies may affect student outcomes in an online classroom (Shearer et al., 2020).

Exploring the individual experiences of instructors who have engaged in various learning modalities is the first step in building an understanding of what works, and perhaps what does not work, in meeting the dynamic needs of students today (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This study utilized data from educational theories which draw upon the science of learning and development (SoLD) principles (Osher et al., 2018). The SoLD principles of learning demonstrate the ways in which environmental conditions, instructional strategies, social emotional skills, and systems of support are applicable to academic achievement, and their potential to interact or affect one another (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Similar study of online learning experiences suggests student perceptions to significantly and positively affect factors of self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication in learning (Wei & Chou, 2020). The researcher identified comparable findings related to these constructs in their investigation of instructor observations and experiences regarding changes in academic regime, peer interaction and self-concept resulting from online learning.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

Social and emotional development during adolescence impacts spiritual development (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). As awareness of self and others expands, Christian principles begin to emerge as the adolescent evaluates their perception of themselves and of their peers (Good & Willoughby, 2008). The bible provides scripture which further deepens an

understanding of spiritual development and demonstrates the need undergo various stages of growth or development in walking with Christ. Similar to constructs of social and emotional development, spiritual development occurs along a progressive spectrum. For example, in the New Testament, Ephesians (4:13-15) expresses infancy in Christ as inexperienced and immature, yet Matthew (5:48) confirms the ability to achieve wholeness, perfected as the Father is perfect.

Though believers are refined as they continue in their walk with Christ, the underlying process of spiritual development may be hindered by delays in social or emotional development. Complexities between spiritual development and identity achievement during adolescence may interact or otherwise detour spiritual progression (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Religious beliefs and practices may also impose a direct effect on the development of the adolescents' perception of morality and judgment (Estrada et al., 2019).

Overall, previous study offers consistent findings regarding patterns of adolescent development as they relate to spiritual development, academic achievement and social emotional development. Literature presents a positive correlation between involvement in spiritual activities and academic achievement, as well as a negative correlation between spiritual activities and substance use (Good & Willoughby, 2011). Spiritual development also supports social and emotional development as it relates to self-control and self-regulation (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Research presents similarity in the findings regarding the effects of spiritual development on social and emotional development, and the effects of spiritual development on academic achievement, however the association between social and emotional development and academic achievement remains vague. The current study offers insight into the observations and

experiences of instructors regarding the perceived impact of delayed or diminished social and emotional development during periods of online learning.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following is a list of definitions of terms that are used in this study.

**Adolescence** – Adolescence is defined as the critical developmental stage in which social independence is established (Steinberg, 2014). Within this study, adolescence will be further utilized to indicate high school-aged students, typically between the age of 14-18.

**Common Core Standards** – Common Core Standards refer to a nationwide set of academic standards and learning goals collaboratively developed to ensure all students receive consistent knowledge regardless of their location (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2021).

**COVID-19 Pandemic** – COVID-19 Pandemic refers to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2); first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, then in the USA in January of 2020 in Seattle, Washington (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

### **Significance of the Study**

Student outcomes in public education are objectively measured in relation to academic performance demonstrated within standardized testing modules. Though social and emotional factors are required as a component of standardized curricula, these factors are not regularly or structurally assessed in an objective manner. Instead, educators are provided a rubric of standards, benchmarks, and indicators regarding students' social-emotional development. However, there are no procedures to consistently evaluate the associated advancement or identification of needs. Noting previous study regarding the impact of educational environments,

the study aims to explore how educators have experienced students' social and emotional development in relation to an online learning environment

During the academic year, public school districts conduct standardized testing to evaluate student academic achievement. The current study explores the experiences of online educators regarding patterns of student social and emotional development resulting from the mandated online implementation of standardized learning models. This understanding of phenomena regarding the demonstrated social-emotional effects of an online learning environment further aid in explaining the changes observed in standardized test results related to academic performance during and following periods of mandated online public education.

### **Summary**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all face-to-face social interaction as it applies to education, occupation, religion and entertainment were immediately suspended. Digital accommodations offered an immediate solution to keep individuals engaged, however these accommodations were not appropriately designed or structured to ensure the necessary social and emotional development of adolescents. Assessing the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of the imposed digital learning environment allows research to build upon an understanding of the adolescents' need for face-to-face social interaction and the potential effects of suspending opportunities of applicable social interaction.

Understanding the effects, or deficits observed in public education offers a suitable starting point. Nationwide the vast majority of states adhere to a common core curriculum regarding elementary and secondary education. This standardized curriculum provides a consistent measure of instruction and academic achievement for educators and students alike. Additionally, it promotes a standardized appraisal of social and emotional opportunities and

developmental outcomes within the adolescents' learning environment. With core curricula designed for student-centered implementation and peer-to-peer interaction, the adolescents' academic achievement as well as social and emotional development resulting from distance-based learning may reveal significant differences from previous years of traditional learning.

Research has not provided a thorough discussion of the necessary adaptations in moving adolescent education from a traditional setting to an online setting. Study to review curricula and guided social and emotional development in an online environment remains incomplete, offering insight only to the current social or emotional state of the student rather than a more progressive assessment of social and emotional development (Henritius et al., 2019). Identification and discussion of adolescent needs regarding online education and social emotional development is necessary in building an understanding of the risks, deficits and social determinants of health which may further impact adolescents as they transition to adulthood. The current descriptive qualitative phenomenological study explores how educators have experienced students' social and emotional development following participation in an online learning environment, with emergent themes which provide insight into the impact on social and emotional development following periods of mandated online education.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

In response to limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential effects of regulatory isolation efforts, it is necessary to examine the resulting effects including those of the mandated online learning environment. Previous literature has established the correlation between social emotional development and the traditional learning environment; however, study has not thoroughly explored educators' experiences regarding students' social and emotional development in relation to the online learning environment.

Regarding the revision of educational models Wei and Chou (2020) discuss the importance of in-depth curriculum planning specific to the online classroom and ongoing digital support to ensure academic achievement. Purarjomandlangrudi and Chen (2019) further demonstrate the need to assess and rebuild the framework which guides the foundational research of educational models within a digital environment as it relates to academic achievement. Yet relevant literature regarding the social and emotional impacts of limiting adolescents to a digital environment remains insufficient. Research is lacking study specific to the predictive measures of the educational environment as it relates to social and emotional development and the collective effects on both academic achievement and social emotional development. The following sections explore social and emotional development in reference to adolescent development and academic achievement in the online learning environment.

### Description of Search Strategy

The search strategies utilized for this study varied slightly on the basis of data being sought. In collecting literature applicable to digital environments, social networks and adolescent development, the Liberty University online Jerry Falwell Library was utilized to access

Psychology database including ProQuest, PsycNet, and EBSCO. Within each database, selected literature met search criteria specific to peer-reviewed journal articles and favored those published within the previous five years, with the full text available online. Newspaper articles, book reviews and dissertations were further excluded.

Regarding literature which reflects the studied impacts of a digital learning environment, search terms included online learning and student perception, instructor perception, academic achievement or social emotional development. Literature relevant to adolescent social networks included adolescence and social media, social networks or social interaction search terms. Search terms used for literature which reflects adolescent development included adolescence and mental health, learning, social skills or social influence. Furthermore, peer-reviewed journal articles which populated as other suggested articles within the Jerry Falwell Library search were included for review.

Content specific to standardized curricula in secondary education was searched in the online library utilizing terms including standardized curricula, core curricula and common core. Additionally, itemized descriptions of standards, benchmarks and indicators regarding the social emotional outcomes of common core curricula was accessed through the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Religious-based literature review was primarily collected as the result of independent biblical study and review of Christian-based books published within the last ten years. Additionally, the online library was utilized to search peer-reviewed journal articles with search terms religion and adolescent education, adolescent participation, and adolescent identity.

## Review of Literature

Research in this field of interest has demonstrated the adolescents' identity to be strongly influenced through peer interaction. During social distancing mandates, adolescents have had limited social interaction and have been restricted from participation in their traditional learning environment with peers, impairing sociability and psychological processes such as emotional intelligence and empathy (Waytz & Gray, 2018). Though previous study reveals the impact of adverse childhood experiences regarding various environmental factors such as social isolation, there is limited research on the implications of the social and emotional deficits adolescents may have experienced during this time of modified social interaction due to social distancing mandates.

Adolescent development represents a stage of individuation which occurs as the result of socialization as the individual builds upon their self-awareness and participates in opportunities to engage with others. As the adolescent engages in appropriate social interaction, individual experiences begin to impact psychological adjustment, achievement and behavior (Harter, 2012). During adolescence, the individual establishes a perception of self, as well as a perception of others and of self when amongst others. Within the public education system, adolescents are provided an opportunity for social interaction and collaboration with peers in an effort to meet culturally relevant and age-appropriate standards of social and emotional development.

Previous, primarily quantitative study has looked to establish a better understanding of this social learning environment and to further substantiate any contributing variables (Emery & Anderman, 2020). However, the inconsistencies and psychometric weaknesses of many of these quantitative studies have led to the increasing demand for qualitative phenomenological study to provide a comprehensive exploration of the learning environment (Fulmer & Frijters, 2009).

Additionally, prior study looks to the personal experience of social or emotional well-being in the learning environment, with few studies considering an observational perspective. The current study builds upon our understanding of the social learning environment through the exploration of social and emotional development of students as experienced by their educators. The following sections provide a review of existing literature demonstrating the functional value and mediating factors of adolescent social and emotional development.

### **Common Core Standards of Social and Emotional Development**

The common core standards of social and emotional development are designed to further reflect principles consistent with developmental appropriateness, cultural responsiveness, universal design, and trauma-informed approaches in the classroom (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016). However, previous study warns of implementation challenges of the common core model, reflecting that of academic and social emotional progress concerning educator resistance; lack of aligned expectations; and difficulty in achieving educational transitions (Polikoff, 2017). Of note, the standards related to academic implementation and achievement are measured by the instructors' delivery of standardized curriculum and the learners' demonstrated performance in standardized testing; while requirements regarding social and emotional development are dependent upon the environmental and instructional conditions of the classroom and remain subjective, as experienced or perceived by the instructor. The current study was designed to build upon an understanding of the experiences and perceptions of public educators who have observed the social and emotional development and deficits of students during and following changes to the environment and instructions conditions of the classroom.

Literature review of previous research regarding implementation of the Common Core State Standards produced four relevant studies. Each prior study discusses the educational framework and evaluates the efficacy of standardized education from the educators' perspective. However, the framework and efficacy is explored in relation to academic outcomes with little to no inclusion of social and emotional outcomes or the moderating factors of social and emotional development. Of the nine relevant studies, four offered a qualitative approach. Two of these qualitative studies were utilized to inform and support the methodological approach of the current study, while two were more useful in gaining an understanding of the educational framework surrounding standardized education.

The first of these four studies was by Polikoff (2017) offers an evaluation of the common core standardized model of education, asking the question "is common core working". While the study does not answer this question, it demonstrates the lack of reliable data to support the use of this model and rallies for the development of a standardized measure. Polikoff suggests the need for a standardized measure as means for determining whether common core is working, and for use in strategic planning to otherwise enhance student outcomes.

The study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) also provided an interpretation of condensed data drawn from various educational strategies to assess the structure of a productive educational model. Their study drew particular attention to the role of social and emotional development, course implementation, systems of support and the educational environment. While not specifically dissecting the Common Core model, their study explores the constructs of standardized education as a whole and promotes the educational environment as a key factor in supporting developmental needs. Still, consistent with other previous research, Darling-

Hammond et al. (2020) provide no evidence or description of the actual impact on student outcomes in relation to the educational environment or any of the other identified constructs.

Better aligned with the methodology of the current study, one descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was utilized to explore the experiences and perceptions of educators regarding the implementation of Common Core in public education throughout the school districts of Upstate New York. Swanson et al. (2020) used a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit district superintendents, followed by a snowball sampling strategy in which participating superintendents recruited administrators and teachers within their district. A semi-structured one-to-one interview approach allowed the researchers to engage with each participant, with prompts and exploratory questions to explore each participants' experience in implementation of the Common Core State Standards in the classroom.

The third study by Swanson et al. (2020) was designed to better understand the experiences and observations of educators in relation to students' academic outcomes following implementation of the Common Core model. Using thematic content analysis to identify patterns within their collected data, Swanson et al. discovered themes related to the level of change regarding teaching strategies, developmental difficulty regarding student readiness for the curriculum, accessibility regarding differentiation in student needs and an increased level of attention from stakeholders. Of the emerging themes, the researchers noted the significance of differentiation in the implementation of curricula and the expressed concern of environmental impact. In the study, participants described similar challenges related to differentiation and environmental changes which they have experienced in transitioning between traditional and online educational environments.

A qualitative phenomenological case study also aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of educators regarding implementation of Common Core in public education specific to the impact of geographic and socio-economic variation across six states. Smith and Thier (2017) used a theoretical sampling strategy to determine geographical sites (states), and a snowball sampling strategy to recruit 46 participants from the six states selected. A semi-structured one-to-one interview approach supported the exploration of educational policy and policy implementation in relation to the Common Core State Standards as perceived by educators in each of the states sampled.

In the fourth qualitative study by Smith and Thier (2017) proposed a triadic framework of implementation factors extending across geographic and socio-economic boundaries at each level of the public education system. Findings from their study revealed challenges at each site and within each level, including limited capacity, resistance, and misunderstood intentions. Interviews with educators in all six states demonstrated the negative impacts of Common Core at each of the three levels, however limited capacity was the most significant of these factors. Furthermore, limited capacity was described in terms of resource scarcity and lack of pedagogical knowledge and understanding. In the current study, these same constructs of limited resources and pedagogical knowledge emerged in response to the sudden shift to an online environment without the provision of standardized digital materials or adequate time for preparation.

### **Standards, Benchmarks, and Indicators of Social and Emotional Development**

During stages of adolescent development, the primary objective is that of individuation (Tamnes et al., 2017) in which the adolescent establishes a sense of individual identity and seeks mastery of the cohesive trait-level characteristics which will support achievement in relation to

social determinants of health (Wickrama & Merten, 2005). The necessity of this process has been supported by prior study of the social and emotional trait-level characteristics established during adolescence, demonstrating a series of significant correlations regarding the stability of relationships, the risk of substance abuse, the risk of mental health disorders, and attachment in adulthood (Allen, Chango, & Szewedo, 2014; Allen et al., 2005). The social and emotional standards identified within the framework of the common core curricula are consistent with the age appropriate social and emotional skills needed to support adolescent prosocial behavior and promote positive psychosocial outcomes as the adolescent transitions to adulthood (Allen et al., 2006).

While the assigned standards, benchmarks and indicators of social and emotional development are not utilized to formally assess students, they provide a progression of competencies which represent various developmental stages appropriate to the students' age and grade level (see Appendix A). There are six primary standards which are organized into two categories: self and social. Standards within the category of self, include self-awareness, self-management, and self-efficacy. Within the category of social, standards include social awareness, social management, and social engagement.

The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction identifies these standards as follows:

1. Self-Awareness – Individuals have the ability to identify their emotions, personal assets, areas for growth, and potential external resources and supports.
2. Self-Management – Individuals have the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.



3. Self-Efficacy – Individuals have the ability to motivate themselves, persevere, and see themselves as capable.
4. Social Awareness – Individuals have the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
5. Social Management – Individuals have the ability to make safe and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions.
6. Social Engagement – Individuals have the ability to consider others and show a desire to contribute to the well-being of the school and community.

Additionally, resources regarding the background and implementation of social and emotional learning objectives have been published by the Social Emotional Learning Indicators Workgroup for state standardized curricula and made public on the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) website. These resources were originally developed in 2016 and referenced in the 2019 guided curricula package provided by OSPI (see Appendix A).

### **Function of Social and Emotional Development**

Social and emotional development is necessary in the progression of one's identity during adolescence, guiding the adolescents' perception of others and perception of self amongst others. These perceptions support the adolescent's assessment or integration of individual trait-level characteristics, which function as mediating factors within the complex and expanding social structure, or social network (Hagger et al., 2019).

Social and emotional development during adolescence provides the foundation for appropriate prosocial functioning as the adolescent transitions into adulthood (Allen et al., 2006). The adolescents' individual identity within the social network, level of acceptance from their

peers, and acquired social skills regarding autonomy and peer influence lead to a series of self-reinforced expectations and affects maintenance of close relationships (Allen, Chango, & Szewedo, 2014).

Identification of inconsistencies in the adolescents' social network may also lead the adolescent to evaluate their own beliefs, values, and behaviors, promoting the potential for significant change (Berk, 2019). This process of self-evaluation within the social network drives the development of individual traits consistent with mastery and motivation (Tamnes et al., 2017), aiding in the emerging sense of identity. Advanced competencies within the social network further aid to promote self-esteem (Donald et al., 2017) and support prosocial behavior (Fu et al., 2017).

Additionally, patterns of social and emotional development are shown to influence adolescent suppression and appraisal and effect adolescent onset of mental health disorders (France et al., 2019). Symptom severity regarding mental health disorders in adolescence is further correlated with poor emotion regulation, with the highest level of severity being experienced by adolescents with the poorest ability to self-regulate emotion (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014).

Literature review of the function of social and emotional development in the educational environment produced five relevant studies. Three quantitative studies measured the adolescents' range of social and emotional development as a predictive factor regarding risk of deviant behavior during adolescence and in early adulthood. Specified measures of deviant behavior in these studies included substance use, criminal behavior, and delinquency or aggression toward others.

The first study distilled longitudinal data collected from 177 adolescents. Allen et al. (2006) utilized this data to measure the adolescents' self-report of susceptibility to peer influence as a measure of social and emotional development. The adolescents' report of factors related to popularity, peer influence and close relationships with peers demonstrated susceptibility to peer influence as a predictive measure of deficits in psychosocial functioning and increased levels of substance use during adolescence and early adulthood.

In a second study of longitudinal data drawn from 184 adolescents, Allen, Chango and Szwedo (2014) compared social development during adolescence with appropriate social adjustment in adulthood. Self-report of close relationships during adolescence was predictive of close relationships in early adulthood. However, susceptibility to negative peer influence within these close relationships appeared to be a moderating factor of criminal behavior in both adolescence and early adulthood.

In a third study, Allen et al. (2005) assessed longitudinal data collected from 185 adolescents to measure the effects of popularity in regard to social and emotional development. Popularity and social status during adolescence demonstrated more secure attachment styles in relationships only during adolescence. Adolescent popularity was further correlated with delinquency and hostility or aggression toward peers in early adulthood.

Consistent results regarding the negative correlation between social and emotional development and deviant behavior were demonstrated by each. However, these results were the findings of quantitative studies which used longitudinal data of self-rated reports to measure the adolescents' social and emotional development and adjustment. The proposed qualitative study explores the educators' experience regarding their perspective of the adolescents' social and emotional development rather than the students' own report.

Two qualitative studies exploring the constructs of social and emotional development in the classroom were found to be closely aligned with the study. Offering a systems-level perspective of social and emotional development, Allen et al. (2015) explored the impact of relational variables including attachment and autonomy with significant others. Additionally, Yeager (2017) brought attention to the conflict between the necessity for social and emotional development during adolescence, and the lack of effective social and emotional learning programs being implemented. Collective, these studies marked the necessity of social and emotional learning (SEL).

Allen et al., 2015 explored autonomy and attachment as a function of social and emotional development, building upon an understanding of the transition between parental influence to peer influence. Noting the necessity of adolescent socialization, Allen et al. (2015) identified developmental patterns in which adolescents most socialized into the adolescent subculture demonstrated the highest relational values in both parental and peer relationships. Within these findings, the researchers also discuss the divergent paths between socialized adolescence in reference to adjustment and achievement in adulthood. Adolescents most engaged in the adolescent subculture are less socially competent as adults. The adolescents' ability to navigate the adolescent subculture while resisting peer influence and connect with peers while maintaining autonomy was shown to be most valuable regarding social and emotional development.

Yeager (2017) reviewed the specific age-based outcomes of adolescent programs intended to guide social and emotional development in the educational environment. Meta-analysis of social emotional learning programs with aims including depression prevention and aggression reduction were shown to be significantly less effective in high school populations.

Furthermore, programs to reduce recidivism had no significant impact on high school students, and programs to enhance psychosocial skills resulted in harmful or negative effects amongst high school students.

Yeager (2017) further discusses the controversy between models which suggest social and emotional development requires the student to change, versus those which suggest that the educational environment must change. Noting that the findings from this research offer evidence for and against each of these models, Yeager suggests educators employ a middle ground option in which both the environment and the student evolve. Promoting social and emotional development of the student and of the environment provides the student with a safe environment to practice mastery of social emotional skills, while enhancing the students' intrinsic competency of social and emotional skills so they can exercise them effectively in other environments outside of the classroom.

Relevant to the current study, each of these previous studies demonstrates the function of social and emotional development as the primary objective of adolescent development and assert the significance of social and emotional development as the primary mediating factor of adjustment during adolescent and into adulthood. Each of these previous studies also supported the current study in reference to the development of the interview questions utilized and in furthering the researcher's understanding of the challenges to social and emotional development from various implementation-based perspectives.

While these studies explored the framework of social standards during adolescence, there was a limited catalog of studies which assessed these standards from the perspective of others who function within adolescent social environments (Allen et al., 2005). In addressing this gap,

the current study offers an exploration of educators' experiences and perspective regarding students' social and emotional development following the online educational environment.

### **Variables of Social and Emotional Development**

Adolescence also introduces a developmental stage of heightened emotional reactivity and sensitivity to peer influence (Lee et al., 2014). Throughout adolescence, identity achievement remains vulnerable to the effects of integrated social influences and social environments. Tamnes et al. (2017) report the developmental stage of adolescence to be associated with heightened sensitivity to social cognition; encompassing social awareness, social management, and social engagement. The associated trait-level characteristics of self-awareness, self-identity and self-esteem also remain vulnerable to the effects of social structuring throughout adolescence. Significant changes in the structure or function of the adolescent's social network can impact the developing brain and influence the development of trait-level characteristics (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Spiritual development and intergroup ideologies further challenge the developing sense of self (Good & Willoughby, 2008) affecting the vulnerability of the adolescents' social cognition, self-awareness, and perceived environmental limitations. These cognitive variables are related to social influence and propose a mediating effect on the adolescents' identity and behavior (Hagger et al., 2019), with correlating factors of individual behavior, traits and intentions further mediating the effect of social influence.

Within the common core model of education, the classroom is intended to provide the social environment necessary to promote prosocial variables regarding appropriate adolescent social and emotional development. Prosocial behavior incorporates the social skills necessary to relate to others and participate appropriately within a social environment. During adolescence, this process includes the development of cognitive variables specific to self-identification, social

influence and social structure, with associated implications related to mental health and academic achievement (France et al., 2019).

Analysis of social and emotional development during adolescence suggests that adolescents who develop prosocial skills of autonomy and leadership experience a greater range of positive psychosocial outcomes (Allen et al., 2006). Research regarding sociability during adolescence reveals a positive correlation between psychosocial factors of social and emotional development such as impulse control and social awareness, and its effect on secure attachments, quality of relationships and stability of mental health (Allen et al., 2005).

Literature review regarding the variables of social and emotional development resulted in five studies, each of which assess the impact of the social environment on social and emotional outcomes. Of these, two quantitative studies measure psychosocial factors of the social environment.

In the first study, Lin et al., (2020) reveal correlating factors between perceived social support and psychological distress. Sampling participants actively using social media platforms, Lin et al. assessed the strength of the relationship between socialization through social media and mental health distress or symptomology. Problematic social media use was indicated by negative social comparison and social escapism and was further correlated with lower levels of perceived social support and higher levels of psychological distress.

A second study conducted by Xu et al. (2019) assessed the relationship between social environments and social interaction. Evaluating social interaction within the context of socio-emotional support and personal satisfaction, Xu et al. demonstrate the effectiveness of online social environments. Combined physical cues (environmental stimuli) and social cues in the

social environment, can provide a significantly positive effect on perceived control, connectedness and responsivity.

Aligned with the current study, three studies specific to the effects of social environments and peer influence during periods of mandated social distancing were also uncovered. Marroquin et al. (2020) examined the social and emotional outcomes mediated by the participants' perceived availability of social support or social resources, while Trope et al. (2021) assessed social and emotional outcomes in relation to established theories of social proximity.

The first study speaks directly to the socio-emotional effects of social distance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Marroquin et al. (2020) sampled 435 individuals, collecting data regarding social distancing efforts and experienced psychological distress. Findings indicated a significant correlation between psychological distress and social distancing, even amongst those who reported high levels of social support and a large social network.

In a second study, Trope et al. (2021) discuss the concept of regulatory scope in broad reference to psychological proximity in the social environment. Assessing social and emotional regulation, Trope et al. review previous research, identifying the social and emotional regulatory tools necessary to fulfill social roles in various social environments. Findings further indicate a correlation between a lack of flexibility in the association of psychological distance and an increased risk of psychological distress. Findings provide additional implications for the necessity of integrating both high- and low-level regulatory tools to match the regulatory demand or challenges of the social environment.

In the third study, Ford (2021) encompassed the moderated and mediated effects of social environments and peer influence as the result of social distancing in a young adult population with a mean age of 20. Using a convenience sampling strategy, Ford (2021) recruited 230



undergraduate psychology students from two university campuses in Southern California. Participants kept a daily log for three days, recording data specific to social distancing (environmental), online social interaction, psychological well-being, social well-being and physical health.

Ford's (2021) study revealed a consistent pattern in which online environments and online social influences negatively impacted participant well-being. Overall, heightened experiences of socially distant environments and interactions were associated with decreased mood, decreased efficacy in managing stress, decreased perception of social support, withdraw from interpersonal interaction, increased symptoms of physical illness, and decreased health related behaviors such as diet, exercise, and spiritual practices. Interestingly, participants' expressed sense of helplessness did not change in relation to more or less exposure to online social environments and interactions. Ford provides a foundation regarding the impact of social distancing on young adults however, these findings are limited to self-report and may not be transferable to the high school student population.

Each of the studies demonstrated a significant decline in psychosocial well-being as the result of predominantly online social interactions and influences. Collectively, the previous studies informed the current study in identifying the potential mediating variables, selecting content for semi-structured interview questions and building knowledge surrounding the social and emotional impact of social influences.

There is insufficient study of the moderating factors which affect social and emotional development during adolescence (Allen, Chango, & Szwedo, 2014), particularly in reference to socially distant environments and influences. The study addresses this gap in exploring social

and emotional development in the educational environment with the online classroom environment as a moderating factor.

### ***Mediating Factors of Social and Emotional Development***

The adolescents' expanding capacity for information processing and social cognition leads to the promotion of individual identity (Good & Willoughby, 2008), initiating changes in self-awareness and self-esteem (Berk, 2019). Throughout adolescence, emerging social and emotional skills remain vulnerable to the impact of social influences regarding the adolescents' social environments and peer influence (Allen et al., 2006). Consequently, appropriate social and emotional development can also serve to mediate the effect of these social influences as the adolescent establishes a sense of individual identity (Tangney et al., 2004).

The adolescents' perception of the self and of others is influenced by social structures and the need to conform within the adolescents' social environment (Tamnes et al., 2017). Integrating with the social environment, the adolescent experiences a revision of information processing and social structuring. This aids in the evolving formation of the adolescent's identity, utilizing the social structure to evaluate themselves and their peers (Blakemore, 2018). Social and emotional development and adaptations within the social environment act to further mediate the effects of both positive and negative peer influences (Allen et al., 2005).

The social and emotional effect of peer influence during adolescence is correlated with the adolescents' social determinants of health (Wickrama & Merten, 2005). Additionally, peer influence significantly impacts the process of individuation during the formation of the individual's identity (Tangney et al., 2004), and affects the social-emotional wellbeing or vulnerability of the adolescent (Berk, 2019). Individual traits, mediated by social influences are further shown to impact adolescent behavior and psychosocial outcomes (France et al., 2019).

*Social Environments.* Individual stressors experienced within the social environment provide a predictive measure of social and emotional development, psychosocial outcomes and mental health disorders during adolescence (Lewis & Olsson, 2011). Primarily, the adolescent's social environment generates a mediating effect on the adolescent's perception of self and of others (Marmot, 2007). Both positive and negative environmental influences during adolescence affect the developing brain and impact cognitive structuring (Lee et al., 2014).

The negative effects of adverse social environments during adolescence are directly related to inhibited social and emotional development (Hagger et al., 2019). These deficits are further suggested to result in a limited sense of autonomy and a diminished sense of perception (Allen & Loeb, 2015). Alternatively, prosocial environments and reward-based social activities are demonstrated to promote likability and attention within the social network (Altikulac et al., 2019). Utilizing prosocial learning environments to enhance social-emotional development and address adolescent needs is demonstrated to improve psychosocial outcomes including improved academic achievement and social determinants of health (Yeager, 2017).

*Peer Influence.* Adolescents demonstrate the need to identify with others, seeking positive regard and acceptance or promotion of status from within their peer group (Harter, 2012). Positive interaction with peers can serve as a mediating factor to reduce the risk of adolescent substance use, depressive symptoms, and impulsivity (Agans et al., 2014). Participation in peer group activities such as sports or religious activities are often positively associated with adolescent social and emotional development (Estrada et al., 2019). For example, athletic activities increase motor competence and motivation, each of which are positively correlated with the adolescents' expressed sense of self-worth (Bardid et al., 2016). Additionally, religious activities promote the development of coping skills, self-awareness and self-esteem

(Estrada, et al., 2019), with a positive correlation between prosocial emotionality and attendance of religious activities (Lyon et al., 2016).

Alternatively, peer interaction through social media is generally demonstrated to have a negative effect on the developing adolescent (Buglass et al., 2017; Frison & Eggermont, 2016). Social media use increases individual concern related to fear of missing out and increases vulnerability due to frequent self-disclosure and self-promotion efforts online (Buglass et al., 2017). Time spent on social media is further demonstrative to be positively correlated with the development or perpetuation of internalizing symptoms (Frison & Eggermont, 2016).

Inadequate social and emotional development results in the absence of autonomy and increases the risk of negative peer influence (Allen et al., 2006). During periods of mandated online education, peer influences from the educational environment were reduced to social media-based interactions as the result of social distancing efforts. The current study explores the educators' experiences regarding their perception of students' social and emotional development following periods of online learning.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

In reviewing the constructs of academic achievement or social and emotional development, it is necessary to acknowledge the depth of individual identity and intrinsic value beyond that of the states' standardized curricula. Without a thorough understanding of one's faith in God and one's foundation within His word, no good work can be fully measured.

The biblical foundation of this study reflects two common constructs of Christianity.

1. It is the desire of Christ that Christians maintain a sense of self-worth, it is His intention that Christians come to learn who they are in His image (Genesis 1:26-27).

2. It is God's will that Christians come together to encourage one another, not neglecting to meet with one another (Hebrews 10:24-25, ESV).

Wolters (2005) offers a theological discussion and illustration of the way our worldview may influence these constructs in various domains. As the adolescent seeks to understand and establish a sense of self, they are confronted with conflicting views of the secular world and the kingdom of God. Even as our public educators aim to provide education in a safe and relevant environment, secular demands often confuse perspectives regarding what is good and moral (Estrada et al., 2019).

Individual and shared beliefs contribute to the adolescents' evolving sense of mortality and sound judgement (Joshi et al., 2008). While the educational districts have developed a subjective measure of social and emotional development; guided instruction regarding the standards, benchmarks and indicators of social and emotional development regarding the self and social networks or environments is provided in God's word. As educators and adolescents seek to reclaim truth between what the public school system advises and what God's word informs, Wolters (2005) reminds his readers that all phenomenon of this world must be viewed through the corrective lens of scripture.

In viewing standardized social and emotional development through a corrective lens, scripture presents a collective standard of the self, demonstrating the significance of self-worth; as well as a collective social standard which urges Christians to have confidence in their security in Christ. Similar to the Common Core public education models which employ social and emotional learning requirements, biblical principles demonstrate a Christian model of social and emotional standards. The identified social emotional learning standards include self-awareness, self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, social management, and social engagement.

Educators are provided with the indicators and benchmarks relevant to each standard (see Appendix A), however they are individually tasked with selecting and implementing the teaching strategies which support these parameters within their classrooms. Though Christian principles are not specified as such in public education, Christian educators may consider scripture which speaks to the value of social and emotional development. Each of the six standards of social emotional learning as defined by the Social Emotional Learning Indicators Workgroup (2016) can be further supported with relevant scripture.

*Self-Awareness* – Christians must actively work to recognize the emotions, strengths and deficits which influence behavior. Lacking in self-awareness limits the ability to draw upon the grace of God. 2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV) states that Christians must examine themselves, testing themselves to ensure they are walking in their faith. During adolescence, the capacity to recognize and internalize individual beliefs leads to the adolescents' emerging pattern of religious participation (Estrada et al., 2019).

*Self-Management* – Failing to regulate emotions, thoughts and behaviors creates distance between Christians and the Lord, making them more susceptible to temptation and acts of impulsivity. Rather, the Word provides that “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13, ESV). Similarly, Good et al. (2009) demonstrate this escape in relation to attendance of religious activity, as compared to non-religious activity, in being more consistently associated with less substance use and higher academic success.

*Self-Efficacy* – Without a sense of efficacy and perseverance, Christians are unable to receive all that God has planned for them. Hebrews 10:36 (ESV) confirms the need for endurance in pursuing the will of God and ensuring that followers receive what He has promised to each of them. Self-efficacy and regulation can be further enhanced during adolescence through religious involvement and participation in religious activities (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

*Social Awareness* – The ability to recognize and respect others must include an understanding of different experiences and perspectives. God’s commandments include loving one another just as He has loved them (John 13:34, ESV). Religious involvement leads adolescents to a greater acceptance of others and aids in managing stress and adversity amongst peers (Estrada et al., 2019).

*Social Management* – Conflict resolution is a concept presented over and over in the bible. Though judgement and punishment are to be left to God, conflict is discussed frequently regarding the damages incurred when Christians fail to resolve social issues appropriately. Christians are urged to reconcile (Matthew 5:24, ESV), forgive one another (Colossians 3:13, ESV) and resist vengeance (Leviticus 19:18, ESV). Participation in religious activities can help adolescents to manage difficult or stressful situations, enhancing coping mechanisms and reducing prejudice or hatred toward others (Estrada et al., 2019).

*Social Engagement* – The capacity to be considerate of others and to contribute to the well-being of others provides a demonstration of God’s will. Christians are instructed to not only look to their own interests, but to look to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4, ESV). In religious environments, adolescents have the opportunity to develop meaningful

relationships with peers outside of their typical age or grade level, contributing to the social network and social capital of one another (Good & Willobhy, 2011).

The Word reveals the necessity of social opportunities in building upon faith, practicing and demonstrating God's will, and exercising spiritual gifts. During adolescence, an increased sense of autonomy and peer influence can affect the adolescents' view of religion and associated beliefs (Estrada et al., 2019). Though secular systems, such as that of the public education system promote some concept of structure or guided ideals, scripture provides an unmistakable lens in which the reader can find clarity of God's law (Wolters, 2005). Using the educational system to further explore issues within and across belief systems has the potential to support adolescents in building an understanding and respect for various religions and traditions, while strengthening their own beliefs and realizing their capacity for influence (White, 2004).

Scripture provides clarity in knowing that it is not God's plan for Christians to be alone (Genesis 2:18, ESV), and warns of the danger of isolation (Ecclesiastes 4:12, ESV). The Lord asks that Christians seek self-worth and security in a collective and social manner. While this study aims to analyze phenomenological data in building upon our understanding of social and emotional development in the online educational environment, God's Word serves as the undeniable evidence guiding this study's assumption of the necessity of prosocial development.

### **Summary**

Literature and scripture both demonstrate the necessity of social interaction to support the developing sense of self and an appropriate understanding of social environments. One's sense of wellness and achievement is often correlated with their social and emotional skills regarding awareness and regulation of emotion, social influence, and individual perspective. In consideration of the demonstrative correlation between academic achievement and social and



emotional development in models of standardized public education, it was reasonable to seek further understanding of this relationship as a functional product of one's environment.

Research continues to assess the strength in correlation between students' social and emotional development and their capacity to learn. However, educational environments and social influences are primarily represented as mediating factors of social and emotional development, without thorough review of the moderating function of each. In such, study which informs the development and implementation of social and emotional learning strategies is underrepresented in research (Yeager, 2017). The current study explores educators' experiences in transitioning from mandated online learning environments to the traditional face-to-face classroom, offering insight to their perspectives of the mediated and moderated effects of online educational regarding students' social and emotional development.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

The purpose of the descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how educators have experienced their student's social and emotional development following periods of mandated online learning environments, and the outcomes which they have observed in returning to the traditional classroom. Qualitative research commonly uses a semi-structured interview approach for either individual one-to-one interviews, or group interviews. (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The current study uses a semi-structured one-to-one interview, employing guided open-ended questioning to collect the descriptive data used for analysis in this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The researcher used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to describe and interpret the individual meaning and shared meaningfulness expressed by each participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### Research Questions

The study focused on social emotional development and deficits as experienced by public educators following mandated online learning, upon return to the traditional classroom in the public-school setting. The researcher interviewed public educators with experience working directly with students prior to mandated online learning, during online learning, and upon return to the traditional classroom to collect data regarding the following research questions:

RQ1: How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments.

RQ 2: How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in an online classroom environment.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory considers cognitive function, the social origins of cognitive functioning and the mediating role of social interaction throughout adolescent development (Eun, 2019). In identifying the gap in research as it relates to the role of social interaction during mandated online learning, each of the research questions were designed to explore and further understand the experiences of the public educators who interact regularly with adolescents. Imparting Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, each of the open-ended questions (see Appendix B) were guided by the theory's concept of assisted learning in achieving the adolescents' social and emotional developmental potential (Wass & Golding, 2014).

### **Research Design**

The study explores the lived experiences of educators who have returned to the traditional classroom environment following mandated social distancing in relation to the observed social and emotional development of their students. In deliberation regarding the research design of the study, both quantitative and qualitative research designs were considered. Though potentially limiting the thoroughness of phenomenological exploration, the study does not consider the use of a mixed methods research design due to the associated increase of anticipated cost and time (McCrudden & Marchand, 2020). Quantitative study can be used to develop statistical data and evaluate the relationship between variables within the educational environment (Headley & Plano Clark, 2020); however, the study does not seek correlational data. Rather, qualitative research best met the objectives of the study in developing a depth of

understanding regarding the lived experiences of educators within the educational environment (Boddy, 2016).

Literature supports the use of qualitative research when exploring the complexities of social phenomenon (Nolen, 2020). Within the field of qualitative research, studies are further defined by the research approach. Guided by review of the five traditions of qualitative research provided by Creswell and Poth (2018), various approaches to qualitative research were considered in regard to the impact each approach may have on the overall design of the study. This process of delineation included review of narrative inquiry, grounded theory, ethnography, case studies and phenomenology within the context of the study.

In qualitative research, a narrative inquiry can be used to communicate the life experiences or story of an individual (Creswell & Poth 2018). Çirakli et al. (2020) conducted a narrative inquiry regarding educational environments and students' subjective memories regarding their classroom experiences in various environments. The researchers used a purposeful sampling strategy to gain the participation of two students who were interviewed regarding their recollection of classroom experiences associated with traditional and online learning environments. The study identified differences in the narrated experiences in reference to each learning environment, specifically in relation to the spatial experiences described by each student. Narrative studies such as these communicate the students' recall of experiences from a first-person perspective, however the current study explores the experiences of educators regarding their observation of the students' social and emotional development specific to each educational environment.

A grounded theory research design allows researcher to identify the factors which have occurred within or alongside a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth 2018), establishing a theory about

the phenomenon (McLeod, 2021). Hemmati and Mahdie (2019) conducted a grounded theory study of postgraduate students regarding their educational environment to identify the factors which contribute most to their perceived level of satisfaction. Using purposeful sampling, the study recruited a heterogeneous sample of 40 participants for semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Using a constant comparative method of grounded theory data analysis, the researchers revealed concerns which they regard as *deformity of the scholarly community*. Theoretically, correction of these deformities has the potential to enhance the level of student satisfaction. Grounded theory research may lead to applicable findings for implementing academic norms in the educational environment, however the current study explores the experiences of educators without objectifying those experiences (van Manen, 2017).

Ethnographies allow the researcher to observe and engage with the environment of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Prastardóttir et al. (2019) completed an ethnographic field study in which the educational environment was observed in relation to gendered space in the classroom. They observed and engaged with 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students for three months during the school year, keeping field notes to document their observations. The study allowed the researchers to portray the ways in which gender was the basis of both physical (room partitions) and informal (seating selection) methods of separation in the classroom. Ethnographic studies can provide information about the educational environment; however, the current study explores the lived experiences of educators within the educational environment rather than the factors of the educational environment itself.

Conducting a case study allows the researcher to demonstrate or discuss a topic of interest from a variety of perspectives in relation to the intervening or contributing factors (Creswell & Poth 2018). Cardellino and Woolner (2019) completed a case study regarding the

balance between architectural design and learning objectives within the educational environment. Drawing upon spatial theory regarding the relationship between physical space and social relationships the researchers investigated the re-designed structural elements of an elementary school and the complimentary teaching or learning approaches accommodated by those elements. Data collection included site visits before and after the architectural remodel which resulted in unstructured observation, incidental interactions and semi-formal discussions with both staff and students. The study was able to demonstrate a significant change in teaching practices and academic achievement as the result of the re-designed educational environment. Case studies can be used to promote specific variables of the educational environment; however, the current study explores the lived experiences of educators regarding their observation of students' social and emotional development rather than defining the specific variables which impacted social and emotional development.

In exploring social phenomenon, such as the learning environment, Fulmer and Frijters (2009) suggest researchers use a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research employs a retrospective exploration, allowing individuals to reflect and bring meaning or meaningfulness to their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2017). Furthermore, phenomenological research allows researchers to build upon a detailed understanding of lived experiences to enhance the reviewers understanding of the phenomenon (McLeod, 2001).

Phenomenology looks to the lived experiences of individuals to explore and interpret individual or shared meaning in relation to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Marco-Bujosa et al. (2020) conducted a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of educators in urban educational environments. The researchers used a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit 17 participants who met the specified criteria of the study. Data was collected

through telephone interviews and participant surveys, with emerging themes regarding experiences in which external policy had negatively affected or devalued the educators' needs. While this study explores educators' experiences regarding their needs within the educational environment, it does not explore educators' experiences in relation to their students' needs such as social and emotional development.

To address this gap, the current study utilizes a descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the individual and shared experiences of educators regarding students' social and emotional development in relation to the educational environment. Specifically, the descriptive qualitative phenomenological study utilizes a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach. Semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used approach in qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The primary advantage of using a semi-structured interview method for the current study was the researcher's ability to interact with each participant (Galletta, 2012) and ask follow-up questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Within the semi-structured interview approach, one-to-one participant interviews are most appropriate for the study in consideration of the topic sensitivity and depth of the context being shared. Wutich et al. (2010) studied the semi-structured interview approach in both a one-to-one and group format, finding that participants shared greater detail on sensitive topics when using the one-to-one interview approach. Stokes and Bergin (2006) conducted a similar study, revealing that one-to-one interviews resulted in participants sharing a greater depth of detail regarding the phenomenon as compared to the group interview format.

Though saturation is not the primary objective of phenomenological study (van Manen, 2014), the current study utilizes research-informed open-ended questions and follow-up

questions to support a greater depth of understanding (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Each interview was guided by 6 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) developed for this study to explore the depth of participant's lived experiences regarding the specific research questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Effective data collection requires the researcher to complete significant research within the field of study prior to conducting semi-structured participant interviews (Kelly, 2010). This allowed the researcher to determine the specific set of questions used for the semi-structured participant interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes. This time allowed the researcher to ask each question, and follow up questions, as well as time to address unanticipated topics when appropriate (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To ensure the accuracy and depth of each participants' described experience, participants were provided with a verbatim transcription of their qualitative interview (Iivari, 2018). During data analysis, participants had the opportunity to review and either amend or confirm accuracy of their described experiences (Morse, et al. 2002). Participant reviews began with an initial review of the transcribed interview, followed by review of the researcher's interpretation of emerging themes identified in the video or transcript of the participant interview (Alase, 2017).

Participants received their interview transcription within 10 days of completing the interview and were asked to provide any necessary comment or clarification (Iivari, 2018). Emerging themes from the verified transcript were identified, and the researcher performed a member check regarding the emergent themes to ensure a correct interpretation of the participants' experiences (Iivari, 2018). The researcher was able to contact each participant for member checking regarding the transcript as well as the emergent themes. Had participants been



unresponsive after three attempts, they would have been removed from the study in order to stay within the designated timeline for completion of data analysis and reporting.

In selecting a phenomenological approach to qualitative research and data analysis, the researcher must also determine whether the purpose of the study is to provide a description of how individuals have experienced a particular phenomenon, or to provide an interpretation of how individuals have experienced a particular phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The researcher must then decide which methods of data analysis best support the theoretic framework and intended objectives of the study (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The study sought the idiographic description of lived experiences as well as the interpretive connection between individual experiences and the collective essence of the phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020). In such, data analysis was consistent with the guidelines of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), supporting the methodological framework of both a descriptive and an interpretive method of analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). A detailed explanation of the data analysis procedures are provided in the data analysis section of this chapter and in Figure 1.

### **Participants**

The study included 8 participants identified as public educators with a minimum of five years teaching experience, including experience teaching in both online and traditional face-to-face educational environments. Recruiting for the study utilized a purposeful sampling strategy with a back-up strategy of snowball sampling (Byrne, 2001). A purposeful sampling strategy was appropriate in ensuring participants met the required criterion in relation to the specified objectives of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The snowball sampling strategy was further appropriate due to the researcher's lack of direct access to the generalized population of interest

(Wohl et al., 2017). The inclusion of participant criterion related to professional experience supports the reliability of the study in producing a more homogeneous sample population in relation to the shared experience of the particular phenomenon explored in this study (Boddy, 2016). Participants were asked to acknowledge and confirm that they meet the participant criterion of the study (see Appendix C).

In selecting the sample size of participants for a qualitative study, the researcher must consider the goals and purpose of the study as well as the diversity of the sample in exploring the commonality of their lived experience. Morse (2000) advises researchers to further consider the quality of the data being collected as well as the expected volume of data collected from each participant in determining the amount of useable data needed for the study. While Stark and Trinidad (2007) suggest a smaller sample size of 1-10 participants for phenomenological study, Boddy (2016) offer research to suggest that a homogeneous sample size of 7-12 is more practical in qualitative study.

In further review of the literature on previous studies to test the necessary sample size to reach data saturation from participant interviews, a sample size up to 12 participants is noted as sufficient when compared to the 0.05 significance criterion of quantitative studies (Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006).

Guest et al. (2006) performed a study to quantify adequate samples sizes to reach saturation in which 60 participants were interviewed. Interviews were performed with data analysis at interval sets of six interviews, with 92% saturation reached after twelve interviews. In this study, the researchers further specified that 97% data saturation was reached after twelve interviews in reference to content that met the operational definition of the study's categories.

Francis et al. (2010) conducted a subsequent study in which two groups of participants were interviewed, with the researchers utilizing either retrospective (group 1) or prospective (group 2) analysis of data to determine whether data saturation had been achieved. Their research procedure for this study specified an initial minimum of 10 interviews, with stopping criterion for data saturation to be after three additional interviews with no new data emerging (for a total of 13 minimum interviews). Findings from their study revealed a plateau in new data after six interviews, reaching up to 92% saturation: with only 3% of new data surfacing beyond the point of stopping criterion (three consecutive interviews with no new data following the initial ten interviews).

Data saturation addresses the likelihood of a study achieving an adequate sample size for content validity. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the concept of data saturation in qualitative research refers to the point in data collection when no new data is found. While Guest et al. (2006) confirm data saturation to be the “gold standard” in qualitative research, van Manen (2014) reminds researchers that saturation is not the primary objective of a phenomenological study. Rather, phenomenological study aims to collect an accurate and comprehensive description of lived experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied (Boddy, 2016). In such, the researcher concludes that reaching a comparable standard of saturation in a phenomenological study is dependent on both adequate sample size and efficacy of the interview regarding participant experiences.

To ensure the researcher’s ability to retain an adequate sample size, the current study utilized a purposeful sampling strategy, with a back-up snowball sampling strategy. This strategy produced a reasonably homogeneous sample of participants who are public educators and have experience teaching in both the traditional face-to-face classroom and in the online classroom.

Purposeful criterion sampling allows researchers to identify and select only participants with lived experience regarding the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling method uses the participant criterion to narrow the selection of participants to those who appropriately represent the goals of the study (Byrne, 2001). The back-up snowball sampling strategy further allows researchers to recruit participants through a series of referrals from other participants or other relevant contacts rather than attempting to contact potential participants directly (Parker et al., 2019). This sampling strategy is particularly appropriate when the researcher does not have reasonable access to the population being studied (Wohl et al., 2017).

Both the purposeful sampling and snowball sampling strategies can assist researchers in reducing the cost and time otherwise associated with recruiting potential participants (Byrne, 2001; Stern et al., 2017). It is the researcher's responsibility to accurately describe the criterion of the sample so potential participants can consider whether the study is applicable to their own lived experiences (Byrne, 2001). To ensure the external validity of the study, the researcher must further verify the participation of a geographically or culturally heterogeneous sample to accurately represent the population (Sharma, 2017).

The researcher initiated a call for participation with a social media post on Facebook. The post included a clear statement regarding the ethical environmental expectations (see Facebook terms of privacy and data use at <https://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation/>) (Smith et al., 1996). In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant, all potential participants were directed to complete the screening form and schedule the participant interview

through a secure scheduling platform, Calendly. The researcher did not supply or request any study-specific or participant-specific data within any public thread on any social media platform.

Finally, all participants were informed that they would be allowed to withdraw from the study at any time prior to publication of the results without any repercussions. The participant withdrawal protocol required that the participant notify the researcher either by email or at any time during the scheduled virtual participant interview that they are no longer interested in participating in the study, at which time all participant data and demographics would have been disregarded and no longer considered usable for data analysis. Participant options regarding withdrawal were discussed during the informed consent process and participants were provided with a written copy of their right to withdrawal, with the researcher's contact information and detailed instructions regarding the withdrawal protocol (see Appendix F).

## **Study Procedures**

### **Recruiting**

Due to the researcher's limited access to the population of interest, a purposeful sampling strategy with a back-up snowball sampling strategy (Wohl et al., 2017) was used to recruit 8 public educators (Boddy, 2016; Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Stark & Trinidad, 2007). The sampling strategies were conducted through a social media platform, Facebook, to support timeliness and fiscal responsibility within the study (Stern et al., 2017). Sampling procedures began with a posted call to participate on Facebook. The call to participate post informed viewers to use the secure link provided within the post to complete a brief screening and schedule the participant interview (see Appendix C). Furthermore, the post included a statement regarding the

ethical environmental expectations (see Facebook terms of privacy and data use at <https://www.facebook.com/privacy/explanation/>) (Smith et al., 1996).

### **Confidentiality**

The use of social media for participant sampling is further observed regarding the increased risk of ethical violations related to confidentiality and participant privacy (Zimmer, 2010). Regardless of expressed interest or participation in the study, social media users are subject to the terms and conditions of each social media platform (Hunter et al., 2018).

Acknowledging this ethical concern, the study was designed to reduce the risk of privacy violations. Social media was used only for a call for participation in research and did not contain any requirement for personally identifiable data to be collected (Smith et al., 1996). To protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant, all potential participants were required to use the secure link provided within the post to complete a brief screening and schedule the participant interview. The participant screening and consent process ensured that each participant met the criterion for participation in the study (Morse et al., 2002) before continuing with the participant interview.

To reduce limitations such as the requirement to travel or the cost of securing a private physical location, the study utilized a private virtual conference room to host online informed consent processes, one-to-one participant interviews and respondent validation processes. The virtual conference platform utilized for all participant interviews was Microsoft Teams, with Zoom established as a secondary option in the event that Microsoft Teams was unavailable at the time of the interview (Gray et al., 2020). Upon receipt of the signed consent statement, the researcher assigned each participant a coded numeric identifier for use in referencing, verifying, and storing participant data throughout the duration of the study. Each participant was also

required to provide a secure email address for communication between the researcher and the participant. The researcher used the secure email address to send a password protected link to enter the private virtual conference room 24 hours prior to the interview, and for follow up contact regarding review of the transcript and of emerging themes. Each participant was instructed to use their assigned numeric identifier as the password to enter the virtual conference room at the time of their scheduled interview and to access all secure documents sent from the researcher throughout the duration of the study.

### **Informed Consent**

The informed consent process was consistent with federal regulations regarding human subjects research and the Association of Internet Researchers' recommendations for engaging in ethical research online. Specific to the study, the informed consent process and documentation of participant consent (see Appendix D) included discussion of the risks regarding participant safety, privacy, and confidentiality; the participants' right to withdrawal and instructions on how to withdrawal; and clarification regarding the ethical expectations of all digital communication within the study (Smith et al., 1996; Zimmer, 2010). Following verbal confirmation from the participant that they understand and agree to the terms of the study, the researcher asked that the participant provide their written consent. Participants were also asked to provide written permission for the researcher to video record all virtual interactions between the participant and researcher. This document of consent and permission to video record interactions was sent and signed by each party via DocuSign before proceeding with the study (Hunter et al. 2018).

In addition to the informed consent process, all participants who acknowledged and confirmed that they met the criterion of the study completed a brief participant survey (see Appendix E) regarding professional experience and demographic data.

## **Interview Process**

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted online in a private virtual conference room utilizing Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used approach in qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The advantage of using a semi-structured interview method for the study is the researcher's ability to interact with each participant (Galletta, 2012) and ask follow-up questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Within the semi-structured interview approach, one-to-one participant interviews were most appropriate for the study in consideration of the topic sensitivity and depth of the context being shared. Wutich et al. (2010) studied the semi-structured interview approach in both a one-to-one and group format, finding that participants shared greater detail on sensitive topics when using the one-to-one interview approach. Stokes and Bergin (2006) conducted a similar study, revealing that one-to-one interviews resulted in participants sharing a greater depth of detail regarding the phenomenon as compared to the group interview format.

Each participant interview was guided by 6 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) developed for this study to explore the depth of participant's lived experiences regarding the specific research questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Effective data collection also required that the researcher complete significant research within the field of study prior to conducting semi-structured participant interviews (Kelly, 2010). This allowed the researcher to determine the specific set of questions which were used for the semi-structured participant interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes, allowing



time for the researcher to ask each question as well as time for unanticipated topics to arise and develop as appropriate (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The semi-structured one-to-one participant interview approach within the qualitative research design is intended to give participants a voice regarding the phenomenological topics or experiences that provide meaning in their lives (Reeves, et al., 2015). The researcher promoted open and honest communication by offering participants the opportunity to reflect and share about the experiences which are of meaning to them (Nizza et al., 2021). In remaining open and curious during each interview, the researcher further encouraged participation by demonstrating that the participant's point of view was valuable (Farr & Nizza, 2019).

### **Data Control**

All participant documents and video recordings have been stored with a coded identifier to ensure the participants' personally identifiable data is not saved with their recorded interview. With the participants' permission, all virtual interactions between the participant and researcher were video recorded and stored on the researcher's secure Microsoft OneDrive account for researcher review and data analysis. The 2018 Common Rule, as defined in Title 45 Part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations requires that researchers maintain all data and documentation related to the research for a period of three years following the completion of any human subjects research study (Office for Human Research Protections). All participant data including video recordings and research documents will remain stored electronically on the researcher's secure Microsoft OneDrive account for three years from the date of completion of the study and permanently deleted thereafter.

Throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, the researcher is responsible for recognizing withdrawn or limited participation due to concerns related to access or user

competence in access or utilizing the Microsoft Teams platform (Archibald et al., 2019). In the event that the primary virtual conference platform or screen record function had failed, or that either become inaccessible to either party, the secondary option for a secure virtual conference platform and screen recording was established as Zoom (Gray et al., 2020). Additionally, the researcher has accounted for participant discomfort in relation to using a video platform or being video recorded (Iivari, 2018). If any participant had become unable to manage the discomfort associated with the use of a video platform or video recording of their interview, the researcher was committed to taking appropriate action to protect the participant (Varpio & McCarthy, 2018).

Data analysis began with the researcher's verbatim transcription of all video-recorded data from the semi-structured one-to-one participant interviews to a Microsoft Word document using NVivo (version 12), a qualitative research and analysis software program (McLellan et al., 2003). Employing respondent validation, the study then used a member checking strategy in which each participant reviewed the verbatim transcript of their interview, amending or otherwise confirming accuracy in the description of their lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Following respondent validation, transcripts were imported to NVivo where all content was reduced to coded text and extracted in relation to the semi-structured interview questions (Braun & Clark, 2006). Utilizing the systematic procedures of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), coded phrases were categorized and used to detect patterns presented in the data, allowing the researcher to identify each of the emerging themes (Smith, 2017). This process of data reduction was repeated until saturation had been reached, depicting a transformation from significant statements, to shared meanings, and finally to a collective description of the universal

essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These transformational findings are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

## **Instrumentation and Measurement**

### **Participant Interview**

The study used a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach to encourage participants to share a greater depth of detail regarding the phenomenon as compared to the group interview format (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used approach in qualitative research (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Within the semi-structured interview approach, one-to-one participant interviews are most appropriate for the study in consideration of the topic sensitivity and the depth of context being shared (Wutich et al., 2010). The one-to-one interview approach further allowed the researcher to interact with the participant (Galletta, 2012) and ask follow-up questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Prior to conducting participant interviews, significant research within the field of study was completed (Kelly, 2010) and a series of interview questions were prepared (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured one-to-one interview approach required that the researcher collect a depth of information regarding the phenomenon of interest, while circumventing the collection of data which was irrelevant or unnecessary for the purpose of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The participant interview utilized 6 open-ended questions (see Appendix B) developed for the study to explore the depth of participants' lived experiences regarding the specific research questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Each interview question explored the experience of public educators in relation to their observation of high school students' social and

emotional development following periods of mandated online education, and upon return to the traditional classroom.

Interviews were hosted and recorded within a secure virtual conference room utilizing Microsoft Teams (Gray et al., 2020). The duration of each interview was approximately 30 minutes, allowing time for the researcher to ask each question as well as time for unanticipated topics to arise and develop as appropriate (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). To remain fully engaged in exploring the participants' described experience, the researcher refrained from making observational notes during the interview. Rather, the researcher utilized the screen record function of Microsoft Teams to video record each interview, allowing for multiple reviews following the participant interview. During the review process, the researcher documented observations regarding the participants' level of participation and expressed engagement, discomfort or emotionality.

### **Data Analysis**

Van Manen (2017) claims the challenge of phenomenology is to uncover the meaning of lived experience, without objectifying it. The current descriptive qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of public educators regarding their observation of students' social and emotional development following the transition between online and traditional classroom environments. The research questions ask (1) how have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments; and (2) how have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in the online classroom environment.

The study utilized NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software to conduct the majority of data analysis tasks. NVivo is a well-established research tool, used in the majority of

qualitative health sciences research and in qualitative study which uses an interview approach (Woods et al., 2015), with version 12 allowing researchers to securely upload, store and transcribe video. Video recordings of each interview were uploaded to NVivo, where the transcription function of the software produced a verbatim transcription of all video-recorded data from the semi-structured one-to-one participant interviews as a Microsoft Word text document (McLellan et al., 2003). Employing respondent validation, the study utilized a member checking strategy in which each participant reviewed the verbatim transcript of their interview, amending or otherwise confirming accuracy in the description of their lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following respondent validation, transcripts were reviewed in NVivo where all content was reduced to coded text phrases and extracted in relation to the semi-structured interview questions (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Qualitative research designs hold a connection between data collection, organization, description, and interpretation (Malterud, 2001). In utilizing a phenomenological approach to qualitative research and data analysis, the researcher must determine whether the purpose of the study is to provide a description of how individuals have experienced a particular phenomenon, or to provide an interpretation of how individuals have experienced a particular phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The researcher must then decide which methods of data analysis best support the theoretic framework and intended objectives of the study (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework merges fundamental principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics with idiography, offering the methodological framework of both a descriptive and an interpretive method of analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This method of analysis seeks the idiographic description of individuals' lived experiences as well as an interpretive lens which connects individual experiences to the

collective essence of the phenomenon within the interpretive framework (Emery & Anderman, 2020). First, using a participant-centered approach, IPA explores at great depth the lived experiences of each participant within the qualitative study (Alase, 2017). Next, IPA guides data analysis toward a systematic methodology used to describe the phrases which demonstrate a shared meaning or meaningfulness of the participants' collective lived experiences of a phenomenon (Smith, 2017).

Each of these processes are jointly represented in the guidelines for using the IPA framework. Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis aims to develop structural and textural descriptions of the phenomenon. The seven steps of this method of descriptive phenomenological analysis include: (1) listing and preliminary grouping; (2) reduction and elimination; (3) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents; (4) identification of the invariant constituents and themes; (5) individual textural construction; (6) individual structural construction; (7) description of the textural-structural essence of the experience.

Adapting Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) urge the researcher to remain flexible, implementing the following guidelines to support the phenomenological research objectives: (1) Multiple readings and making notes; (2) Transforming notes into emergent themes; (3) Seeking relationships and clustering themes.

### **Multiple Readings and Making Notes**

Adapted from Moustakas' (1994) listing and preliminary grouping process, the initial stage includes multiple readings of the verbatim transcripts and multiple reviews of any audio or video recordings, allowing the researcher to become immersed in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith,

2014). In this stage, the researcher will perform a line-by-line reading and review of the data, lending themselves to the experiential claims of each participant (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

Before reviewing data, the researcher must ensure an attitude of *Epoche*, bracketing their own experiences and exercising neutrality regarding both the purpose of the study and the emerging themes (Reeves et al., 2015). Exercising neutrality or objectivity reduces the risk of the researcher incorporating their own assumptions in the interpretation of the data (Malterud, 2001). For the study, the researcher intends to assume and maintain an attitude of *Epoche* prior to and following data collection and analysis. The researcher's early position of neutrality aids in ensuring the ethical appropriateness of the study and guides the researcher as they seek approval from the appropriate committees regarding ethics in research such as participant safety, privacy, confidentiality and consent (Smith et al., 1996). The researcher intended to utilize reflexive journaling in an effort to document and reference any potential influences or personal biases that arise throughout the duration of the study. Maintaining an attitude of *Epoche*, the researcher must also exercise transparency in describing any of these associated influences or biases, including consideration of the researcher's own sociocultural position (Reeves et al., 2015).

During each reading or viewing of the data, the researcher made notes regarding their observation of the interview process. Notes regarding the verbal and non-verbal content, the use of specific language and any initial interpretive commentary is useful during this stage (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher also included notes regarding observed limitations such as the reduced ability to build rapport or the reduced ability to capture non-verbal cues (Archibald et al., 2019). When applicable, notes should include any observed or potential impact of the participant's experience of discomfort in relation to being on video, or to being video recorded (Iivari, 2018), as well as any observed reflexivity related to the researcher's personal or

demographic characteristics (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The primary goal of the *multiple readings and making notes* stage was to identify distinctive phrases and any of the participants' emotional responses.

### **Transforming Notes Into Emergent Themes**

Adapted from Moustakas' (1994) reduction and elimination process, during the second stage the researcher transfers their attention from the original transcript to their notes and exploratory comments (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Drawing from the verbatim transcription, the exploratory comments offer a comprehensive reflection of the data and begin to shape the emerging themes (Malterud, 2001). The researcher used this reflective data to build upon an understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, considering the meaning or meaningfulness of the participants described experience (Emery & Anderman, 2020). In seeking and categorizing emerging themes, the researcher must again return to member checking strategies to ensure an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the participants' individual experience, prior to interpretation of the overreaching theme of the study (Alase, 2017). This stage required that the researcher use a higher level of abstraction, developing a psychological conceptualization of the emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014)

IPA is intended to amplify the lived experience of the participant (Alase, 2017). In developing a psychological conceptualization, the researcher should work toward the interpretation of a concise phrase to cohesively represent the content and content-based annotations (Smith, 2012). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) note the unavoidable influence of the researcher's annotations, while also asserting that the researcher must remain grounded in the specific detail of each participants' individual interview. Emery and Anderson (2020) propose that researchers consider this process to be a dialog between the emerging themes and the



researcher's own experience or knowledge of the phenomenon. The priority of this stage is the establish the hermeneutic circle in which each part can be interpreted within the whole, and the whole can be interpreted by the part (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### **Seeking Relationships and Clustering Themes**

Adapted from Moustakas' (1994) clustering and thematizing process, the third stage involved identifying connections between emerging themes, grouping themes by conceptual similarity and clustering themes within a descriptive or interpretive framework (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher must ensure that they have exhausted the potential for emerging themes from the entire transcript of each interview before beginning to cluster emerging themes or identify connections (Smith, 2012). As themes and subthemes continue to surface, the researcher began to de-construct and condense thematic phrases or statements into fewer words, and finally into the core essence regarding the participants shared lived experiences (Alase, 2017).

### **Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations**

The study assumed that a purposeful sampling strategy, with a back-up snowball sampling strategy would produce a reasonably homogeneous sample of participants who were public educators and had experience teaching in both the traditional face-to-face classroom and in the online classroom. Purposeful criterion sampling allowed the researcher to identify and select only participants with lived experience regarding the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). This sampling method used the participant criterion to narrow the selection of participants to those who appropriately represent the goals of the study (Byrne, 2001). The back-up snowball sampling strategy further allowed the researcher to recruit participants through a series of referrals from other participants or other relevant contacts rather than attempting to contact

potential participants directly (Parker et al., 2019). This sampling strategy was particularly appropriate due to the researcher's limited access to the population being studied (Wohl et al., 2017).

Both the purposeful sampling and snowball sampling strategies assisted in reducing the cost and time otherwise associated with recruiting potential participants (Byrne, 2001; Stern et al., 2017). It is the researcher's responsibility to accurately describe the criterion of the sample so potential participants can consider whether or not the study is applicable to their own lived experiences (Byrne, 2001). To ensure the external validity of the study, the researcher must further verify the participation of a geographically or culturally heterogeneous sample to accurately represent the population (Sharma, 2017).

This research assumed a sample size of 7-12 participants will be adequate for the descriptive qualitative phenomenological study. In selecting the sample size of participants for a qualitative study, the researcher must consider the goals and purpose of the study as well as the diversity of the sample in exploring the commonality of their lived experience. Morse (2000) advises researchers to further consider the quality of the data being collected as well as the expected volume of data collected from each participant in determining the amount of useable data needed for the study. While Stark and Trinidad (2007) suggest a smaller sample size of 1-10 participants for phenomenological study, Boddy (2016) suggest that a homogeneous sample size of 12 may be more practical in many qualitative studies.

Previous study regarding an appropriate sample size tests the necessary sample size to reach data saturation from participant interviews, suggesting a necessary sample size of up to 12 participants (Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006). While objective measures of data saturation are not clearly defined in qualitative research (Bowen, 2008), Francis, et al. propose that data

saturation can be measured in comparison to the 0.05 significance criterion applied in quantitative study. Guest et al. (2006) demonstrates the utility of a range of 7-12 participants in their study which conducted participant interviews with data analysis after every six interviews. Their study revealed that 97% of data saturation regarding content relevant to the study was reached after the second interval, indicating saturation to have occurred between the seventh and twelfth interview.

This research assumed that enough relevant data would be collected to reach data saturation. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the concept of data saturation in qualitative research refers to the point in data collection when no new data is found. While Guest et al. (2006) confirms data saturation to be the “gold standard” in qualitative research, van Manen (2014) reminds researchers that saturation is not the primary objective of a phenomenological study. Rather, phenomenological study should aim to collect an accurate and comprehensive description of lived experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied (Boddy, 2016).

The concept of saturation is discussed as a verification strategy of both validity and reliability in qualitative study, which Morse et al. (2002) advise is the responsibility of the researcher rather than that of the reviewer. In the current study, the researcher utilized semi-structured one-to-one interviews to gain a greater depth of detail regarding participants' lived experiences rather than group interviews or focus groups which provide a greater breadth of contextual data (Stokes & Bergin, 2006).

This research assumed that the researcher would develop an appropriate and comprehensive set of semi-structured interview questions, with an appropriate protocol for the use of clarifying follow-up questions. The advantage of using a semi-structured one-to-one interview method for the study is the researcher's ability to interact directly with the participant

(Galletta, 2012) and ask follow-up questions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To be effective for data collection, the researcher is tasked with completing significant research within the field of study prior to conducting participant interviews (Kelly, 2010), further allowing the researcher to determine the specific set of questions which will be used for the semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The semi-structured interview may also capture data regarding systematic variation impacting the design and implementation of educational strategies (Polikoff, 2017). Furthermore, systematic differences in course design and relevance of course materials can affect the educators' overall experience of online learning (Purarjomandlangrudi et al., 2019), while the efficacy of implementation strategies may produce biases in the perceived student outcomes regarding social and emotional development (Jensen et al., 2020).

Assumed participants would provide an accurate account of their experiences. Qualitative research gives participants a voice regarding topics or experiences that interest them and provide meaning in their lives (Reeves et al., 2015). Researchers can promote open and honest communication during data collection by offering participants the opportunity to reflect and share about the experiences which are of meaning to them (Nizza et al., 2021).

Researchers are challenged with building rapport and gaining the participants' trust during the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In an effort to build rapport, researchers must remain open and curious during each interview, demonstrating to each participant that their individual point of view is valuable (Farr & Nizza, 2019). Building rapport with participants in the study began with the researcher's professionalism and commitment to arriving to each virtual conference five minutes early and ending each conference on time to demonstrate respect for the participants' time, while ensuring a quiet and secure environment in

which the researcher can provide their full attention to the participant. Additionally, the researcher used minimal encouragers and reflective listening skills throughout the interview process to promote participant-perception of rapport (Sharpley et al., 2010).

Assumed the researcher's ability to exercise appropriate bracketing or neutrality of their own beliefs and biases throughout the study. The researcher's sociocultural position has the ability to impact the purpose, design and outcomes of research (Reeves et al., 2015). Exercising objectivity, the researcher must bracket their own beliefs and biases to reduce the risk of incorporating the researcher's own assumptions in the interpretation of the data (Malterud, 2001.) The researcher intends to utilize reflexive journaling in an effort to document and reference any potential influences or personal biases that arise throughout the duration of the study. Maintaining an attitude of Epoche, the researcher must also exercise transparency in describing any of these associated influences or biases, including consideration of the researcher's own sociocultural position (Reeves et al., 2015).

The researcher's position of neutrality also aids in ensuring the ethical appropriateness of the study and guides the researcher as they seek approval from the appropriate committees regarding ethics in research such as participant safety, privacy, confidentiality, and consent (Smith et al., 1996). Furthermore, the researcher must exercise transparency in describing each phase of the study with inclusion of any associated influence of the researcher's own sociocultural position or that of the participants recruited for the study (Reeves et al., 2015).

One limitation of the study was limited external validity. The concept of generalizability in qualitative study has been noted in terms of limited feasibility as compared to that of quantitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). While researchers can utilize random sampling strategies to enhance external validity in quantitative study, sampling strategies have less of an

impact on external validity in qualitative research (Malterud, 2001). Instead, the researcher must accommodate the reviewers' perspective with utilization of appropriate methods of interpretive analysis (Smith, 2010).

Increasing external validity in qualitative study depends on the researcher's interpretation and conceptual description of the findings (Malterud, 2001). In qualitative study, the researcher must approach external validity, or transferability as an opportunity to promote the reviewers' exploration and connection with the lived experiences of the participants (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Giorgi (2008) suggests that qualitative researchers remain more general in their description of the phenomenon, allowing the reviewer greater opportunity to develop their own perspective in connecting with the experiences of others.

Another limitation of the study was the use of recorded video conferencing for data collection using semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Data collection procedures, including the semi-structured interview can influence the results of the study (Gibbs et al., 2007). Using a web-based video conferencing platform rather than a face-to-face venue for interviewing participants may limit participation due to concerns related to internet access or due to the user's competence in access or utilizing the platform (Archibald et al., 2019).

During the semi-structured interview, the researcher must ensure the collection of a depth of information regarding the phenomenon of interest, while circumventing the collection of data which is irrelevant or unnecessary for the purpose of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The researcher must account for the reduced ability to build rapport, and the reduced ability to capture non-verbal cues, creating communication challenges regarding the depth and relevance of shared information (Archibald et al., 2019). Participation may further be further affected by

the participant's experience of discomfort in relation to being on video, or to being video recorded (Iivari, 2018).

Another limitation of the study was the use of social media for initiating a call for participation and the associated risk of participant privacy or confidentiality violations. While the participant call directed individuals use the secure link for participation, any use of social media increases the risk of ethical violations related to confidentiality and participant privacy (Smith et al., 1996; Zimmer, 2010). The researcher was unable to substantially control the parameters of user privacy, as social media users are subject to the terms and conditions specific to the social media platforms which they subscribe to (Hunter et al., 2018).

The study reduced the risk of any privacy violations by keeping the requirement for personally identifying information to an absolute minimum during the initial recruitment phase and eliminating all personally identifying information following participant selection and interviews (Smith et al., 1996). Participants were also notified, verbally and in writing of the environmental expectations related to limited privacy and confidentiality (Zimmer, 2010).

Another limitation of the study was the researcher's lack of experience regarding data collection as it relates to reaching data saturation. The concept of saturation is discussed as a verification strategy of both validity and reliability in qualitative study, which Morse et al. (2002) advise is the responsibility of the researcher. However, Boddy (2016) states that there is confusion and a clear gap in the theoretical expectation and practice of achieving saturation in qualitative research. Bowen (2008) further warns of the challenges novice researchers face in regard to achieving data saturation in qualitative study, primarily due to inconsistencies in the literature as it relates to guidelines or procedures for determining saturation.

Morse et al. (2002) present the point of data saturation in qualitative study as a point in which the researcher reaches replication of data within each category, promoting that replication ensures verification and comprehension of the findings. Alternatively, Hyde (2003) presents data saturation in terms of a coherent interpretation and condensation of data, using a saturation criterion of themes which were present in more than half of the interviews conducted. Though saturation is not the primary objective of phenomenological study (van Manen, 2014), the study utilized research-informed open-ended questions and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) within each participant interview to establish a greater depth of understanding of each participant's lived experience of the phenomenon rather than a breadth of understanding regarding the phenomenon as a whole (Boddy, 2016).

One delimitation of the study was the use of descriptive qualitative phenomenological methodology. The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of educators who have transitioned between an online and traditional learning environment during and following mandated social distancing in relation to the observed social and emotional development of their students. While previous studies have looked to quantitative methodology to establish an understanding the ideal learning environment (Emery & Anderman, 2020), more recent literature supports the use of qualitative research when exploring the complexities of social phenomenon (Nolen, 2020).

Phenomenology provides a retrospective exploration of lived experiences which an individual can reflect upon, and bring meaning to (Van Manen, 2017). In exploring social phenomenon, such as the learning environment, Fulmer and Frijters (2009) suggest researchers use a qualitative phenomenological approach. The study utilized a descriptive qualitative



phenomenological approach with semi-structured one-to-one interviews with six pre-determined questions (McLellan et al., 2003).

Another delimitation of the study was the participant criterion which had to be met in order to qualify for participation in the study. Participants were required to have a minimum of five years teaching experience in a public education environment, including experience teaching in both the online and traditional learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This requirement ensured that public educators had lived experience teaching in each environment and had directly experienced the phenomenon being studied, allowing the data regarding their shared experiences to lead to a relevant and focused interpretation of how the phenomenon has been experienced (Morse et al., 2002).

Phenomenological study involves the meaning or meaningfulness of the lived experiences of individuals (Van Manen, 2017). In exploring the depth of these lived experiences, participants must have experienced the phenomenon and must be capable of adequately and comprehensively describing their experience (Boddy, 2016). In the event that the researcher had been unable to recruit an adequate sample size of qualified participants, either with purposeful or snowball sampling strategies, the researcher would have elected to reduce the criterion from five years' experience to two years' experience and return to the initial sampling process (Palinkas et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

The purpose of the current descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of public educators regarding the social and emotional development of their students in relation to mandated transitions to an online educational environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Relying upon social media platforms, a purposeful sampling strategy with

a back-up snowball sampling strategy was utilized to solicit and recruit 8 participants representing public school educators from Washington state educational districts. The descriptive qualitative phenomenological study utilized a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach. Interviews were conducted through a secure virtual conference room, Microsoft Teams, with each participant. Interviews were video recorded and were approximately 30 minutes each. During the interview, a series of 6 open-ended questions were asked with the additional use of clarifying questions as needed to ensure an accurate and comprehensive accounting of each participants' experience. Interviews were recorded and uploaded to NVivo for transcription and stored on the researcher's secure Microsoft OneDrive account for multiple review. Prior to the first stage of interpretive data analysis, member checking strategies were used to verify the verbatim transcription of each interview.

Following participant verification of the transcript, the researcher began the first stage of interpretive data analysis, multiple review and making notes. Using the researchers notes, the researcher began reducing data to coded text phrases, looking to identify and categorize emerging themes. Upon identification of emerging themes, member checking strategies were used again to verify the themes and interpretation of the participants' individual experiences. In the final stage of data analysis, the researcher referred to the participant-verified transcripts and emerging themes to look for connections between the participants' experiences until the overarching theme of the study had emerged.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how educators have experienced students' social and emotional development following mandated online learning environments. To accomplish this aim, individuals who met criteria specific to experiencing the phenomena (Boddy, 2016) were selected by the researcher using a purposeful sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) to participate in semi-structured one-to-one interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This study set out to explore the perceived strengths and deficits regarding students' social and emotional outcomes upon returning to the face-to-face learning environment.

The current study used a descriptive qualitative phenomenological methodology to explore this social phenomenon (Nolen, 2020). Van Manen (2017) credits phenomenological research as methodology which allows retrospective exploration and brings meaning to lived experiences. This methodology further supported the researcher's ability to engage directly with each participant (Galletta, 2012) and ensure a thorough understanding of how they have experienced the phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

Individual experiences and perspectives were discussed during one-to-one semi-structured interviews of eight participants. Each participant provided a detailed account of their own experiences regarding the classroom environment, as well as their observations regarding the social and emotional development of their students. Emerging themes within the data collected for this study represent the individual experiences and collective essence of the public educators interviewed. The research questions guiding the data collection for this study included:

RQ1: How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments.

RQ 2: How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in an online classroom environment.

Analysis of the data collected from eight one-to-one semi-structured interviews revealed several common themes. Each of these themes converge in an overarching theme which represents the individual experiences described by each participant, as well as the collective meaning of their shared experiences regarding the phenomenon. Chapter four provides a non-interpretive summary of the findings of the current study, presenting descriptive data, method of analysis, tables summarizing the data, and a discussion of validity.

### **Descriptive Results**

The population of participants in the current study consisted of individuals with five or more years of teaching experience within Washington State's public high school education system. More specifically, each of the participants interviewed had experienced the transition between teaching in an online educational environment and a face-to-face educational environment as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related social distancing efforts. Each of the participants were selected from individuals who responded to a social media call to participate which was posted and shared through Facebook.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit public high school educators who had experienced the phenomenon being explored by this study. Using social media, a call to participate was posted on the researcher's Facebook profile and subsequently shared amongst

Facebook users. Interested participants were directed to a Calendly link which required the participant to complete a brief survey to collect demographic data and a secure email address, and then select from a series of dates and times to be complete the one-to-one semi-structured interview. Upon completing the brief survey and scheduling the interview, the researcher was notified of the participants' qualifications regarding the study.

In total, 13 individuals expressed interest in the study and completed the demographic data survey. Of these individuals, four did not schedule a one-to-one interview with the researcher. One additional participant failed to attend the scheduled one-to-one interview and did not respond to any follow-up emails to reschedule their interview within the 6-week window of availability of the researcher. In total, eight participants completed both the demographic data survey and attended the one-to-one interview.

As the result of the purposeful criteria-based sampling approach, eight participants who met the criteria of being a public high school educator in Washington state, with a minimum of five years of teaching experience and with lived experience teaching in both an online and a face-to-face environment during the COVID-19 pandemic were selected for participation in the semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Each of the eight participants signed and returned their informed consent form, with specified consent to allow video recording by the researcher during the one-to-one interview. Aside from the established sampling criteria and required internet access for the online-based one-to-one interview, there were no other restrictions or requirements for participation in the study.

The eight participants in this study were residents of Washington State and educators within the following Washington State school districts: Central Valley (1), Columbus (1), Finley

(1), Glassboro (1), Kennewick (1), Kent (1), Pasco (1), and Vancouver (1). Each of the participants responded to the research advertisement on Facebook.

At the time of the study, all eight participants had transitioned back to teaching in the traditional face-to-face classroom environment, with some students still utilizing an online platform to attend their class. Table 4.1 below identifies the demographic data of the sample population including the participant code, gender, school district where employed, subject taught and number of months that the district enforced online learning mandates.

Table 4.1

*Demographics of Study Participants*

Participant Code	Gender	District	Subject	Months Online
WS2022P001	F	Kent	Home Economics	9
WS2022P002	F	Finley	History	11
WS2022P004	F	Glassboro	Spanish	12
WS2022P006	M	Kennewick	Science	11
WS2022P009	F	Pasco	English	11
WS2022P011	M	Columbus	Mathematics	8
WS2022P012	M	Vancouver	Mathematics	12
WS2022P013	F	Central Valley	English	10

*Note.* M = Male. F = Female.  
*M=3(38%). F=5(62%).*

The interview transcripts for this study totaled 103 pages of single-spaced pages with an average of 12.9 pages per interview. The interview transcripts ranged in length from 9 to 17 single spaced pages of text. The one-to-one interviews produced a total of 392 minutes of content

with an average of 49 minutes per interview. The one-to-one interviews ranged in time from 43 to 56 minutes per interview.

Table 4.2 below identifies the duration of each one-to-one interview and the corresponding number of transcript pages for each interview by participant code. All interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software.

Table 4.2

*Interview Transcript Logistics*

Participant Code	Length (minutes)	Length (pages)
WS2022P001	56	17
WS2022P002	51	13
WS2022P004	47	12
WS2022P006	44	10
WS2022P009	52	16
WS2022P011	43	9
WS2022P012	48	12
WS2022P013	51	14
	Total - 392	Total - 103

## Study Findings

### Data Analysis Procedures

Phenomenology aims to uncover the meaning of lived experience, without objectifying it (Van Manen, 2017). Within the parameters of qualitative research, phenomenology looks to the lived experiences of individuals, allowing the researcher to explore and interpret individual or shared meanings in relation to the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study sought an idiographic description of lived experiences as well as an interpretive connection

between individual experiences and the collective essence of the phenomenon (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework merges fundamental principles of phenomenology and hermeneutics with idiography, offering the methodological framework which supports descriptive and interpretive methods of analyses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The current study used Moustakas (1994) modification of Van Kaam's method of descriptive phenomenological analysis following the guidelines of interpretive phenomenological analysis in utilizing a standardized process of description, reduction, and interpretation.

Engaging in a participant-centered approach, the lived experience of each participant was explored (Alase, 2017), and the participants' description of the phenomenon was documented with a video recording and transcription for further review. Utilizing a systematic methodology, the researcher completed multiple reviews of these videos and transcripts to identify and code phrases which demonstrated individual meaning, and a second series of review to identify and interpret a shared meaning or meaningfulness of the participants' collective lived experiences regarding the phenomenon (Smith, 2017). Each of these processes are jointly represented in the guidelines for using the IPA framework (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis aims to develop structural and textural descriptions of the phenomenon. The seven steps of this method of descriptive phenomenological analysis include: (1) listing and preliminary grouping; (2) reduction and elimination; (3) clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents; (4) identification of the invariant constituents and themes; (5) individual textural construction; (6)



individual structural construction; (7) description of the textural-structural essence of the experience.

Adapting Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) urge the researcher to remain flexible, implementing the following guidelines to support the phenomenological research objectives: (1) Multiple readings and making notes; (2) Transforming notes into emergent themes; (3) Seeking relationships and clustering themes. The steps in implementing each of the research objectives regarding data analysis for the current study are described below.

**Preparation of the data.** Following consent to participate in the study, each of the participants were assigned an alphanumeric code that was used throughout the collection, analysis and presentation of findings in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. Alphanumeric codes ranging from WS2022P001 to WS2022P013 were randomly assigned by the researcher and added to the researcher's secure Microsoft One Drive account as individual cases, allowing all participant data to be accurately uploaded and stored for the researcher to access following the completion of each data collection task.

Participant interviews were hosted and recorded using Microsoft Teams internet-based video conferencing software. Video recordings from each one-to-one participant interview were uploaded for transcription within the selected data analysis software, NVivo 12. Video recordings were stored on the researcher's secure Microsoft One Drive account, and interview transcripts were stored as a Microsoft Word file on the researcher's secure Microsoft One Drive account as well as within the researcher's secure NVivo 12 account.

A total of eight participant interviews were hosted, recorded and transcribed. Each participant was emailed their interview transcript as an editable Microsoft Word document.

Participants were asked to review the transcript for accuracy and completeness and were encouraged to edit the Word document as needed to inform the researcher of any discrepancies or provide any needed clarification. The original transcript was compared to the returned editable document to ensure that all editing or document revisions were accounted for prior to coding and categorizing of the participants' described lived experiences.

All eight of the transcripts were verified as accurate and complete and were returned to the researcher. Upon returning their transcript, one participant had noted that they felt uneasy about the labels (such as *normal*, *slower*, and *smarter*) that they had used during the interview to distinguish between students in their general education classes versus that of their lower-level classes. After subsequent review of the video recording and interview transcript, the researcher determined that this language had no effect on the analysis or outcomes of the data and in such, edited the student labels within the transcript to read simply as *student*. The participant agreed that this edit provided a better representation of their voice and perspectives regarding the lived experiences being explored in this study.

Following the receipt of each approved participant transcript, updates and related edits to each transcript were reviewed by the researcher and uploaded to NVivo 12 as the final draft for use in coding and categorizing the data. The researcher created a list of codes that best represented the participants' expression and description of lived experiences related to the phenomena being studied. A complete list of these codes is shown on Figure 4.3.

**Data analysis.** Data collected from eight individual semi-structured one-to-one interviews was analyzed using Moustakas' modification of Van Kaam's phenomenological method of data analysis. The processes regarding methodological data preparation and analysis are organized and described in reference to three key stages of interpretive phenomenological

analysis, each of which is intended to identify and amplify the lived experience of the participant (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

*Assuming an attitude of Epochè.* To reduce the risk of the researcher's own assumptions impacting their interpretation of the data, it is necessary to maintain a position of neutrality (Malterud, 2001). Prior to reviewing any of the data, the researcher found neutrality in entering an attitude of Epochè through reflective journaling and bracketing. This primarily included time spent journaling independently to identify and consciously set aside any of the researcher's own experiences which may impact or influence the study. Acknowledging and bracketing any personally held biases allowed the researcher to extend neutrality regarding the purpose of the study and any of the emerging themes (Reeves et al., 2015). The researcher's neutrality also supported the assurance of ethical appropriateness throughout the study and guided the researcher through measures of participant safety, privacy, confidentiality, and consent (Smith et al., 1996).

Maintaining an attitude of Epochè, further requires transparency in describing any biases, including any consideration of the researcher's own sociocultural position (Reeves et al., 2015). Though the researcher did not have any personal experience teaching at the capacity of those interviewed, there were several experiences acknowledged during reflective journaling and bracketing exercises. For example, the researcher was previously contracted to work in a public school environment where they were responsible for engaging with high-risk youth in an effort to improve attendance and academic outcomes within the specified population. Additionally, the researcher has children who have attended public school throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and have experienced the social and emotional challenges associated with transitioning between online and face-to-face learning environments. Furthermore, the researcher is a practicing mental

health therapist and has provided direct patient care to individuals who have experienced social and emotional deficits as the result of shifting educational and occupational environments.

The researcher's awareness of these biases allowed them to then bracket any associated biases or assumptions. This was accomplished through continued journaling practices and constant review of the identified biases throughout each stage of data analysis. Specifically, the researcher revisited each coded phrase and emerging theme following each transcript review to verify that their perception of the interviewee's language and context surrounding the language utilized had no association with any of their documented experiences which had been bracketed. While the researcher remained diligent in assuming an attitude of Epochè, one of the shortcomings regarding the nature of qualitative work is the inability to completely remove the researcher from the research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

### **Multiple Readings and Making Notes**

Referencing Moustakas' (1994) listing and preliminary grouping process, the initial stage of analysis included multiple readings of the verbatim transcripts and multiple reviews of all video recordings, allowing the researcher to become immersed in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In such, the researcher performed several line-by-line readings and an immersive review of the data and the experiential depiction of each participant (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

The researcher's observations were noted upon each viewing of the recorded interview and each reading of the transcript. These notes included observations of verbal and non-verbal content, and the use of specific language or labeling used during the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Analysis of one interview also included notes of the researcher's observation of the participant's discomfort in relation to being on video (Iivari, 2018). The priority throughout the *multiple readings and making notes* stage was to identify distinctive phrases, expressed

beliefs or emotional responses specific to the individuals' lived experience of the phenomena being explored.

### **Transforming Notes Into Emergent Themes**

Adapted from Moustakas' (1994) reduction and elimination process, during the second stage the researcher was tasked with transferring their attention from the original transcript to their recorded notes and any exploratory comments (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This stage provided a comprehensive reflection of the data and allowed the emerging themes to surface (Malterud, 2001). The reflective data was also utilized to enhance the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, and to relay the meaning or meaningfulness of the participants' described experience (Emery & Anderman, 2020). After reducing and categorizing data on the basis of their emerging themes, the researcher incorporated member checking strategies to ensure an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the participants' individual experiences, prior to considering any interpretation of the overarching theme of the study (Alase, 2017).

This stage is noted for a heightened level of abstraction which supports the researcher's ability to pair psychological conceptualizations with emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In developing psychological conceptualizations, the researcher was then able to produce a cohesive representation of the content and content-based annotations (Smith, 2012).

For example, coded data from the transcript for participant WS2022P001 included the statement "Even offering a reward doesn't motivate them anymore." This statement was coded as *doesn't motivate them* and was categorized as *unable to motivate*. Participant WS2022P002 shared their experience of student participation in learning activities, noting "Every year, there's always one or maybe two kids that won't participate so I work with them to come up with some

sort of middle ground, but this year I have had more students refuse to participate than I can even accommodate.” This participation statement was coded as *students refuse to participate* and was added to the category *lack of participation*.

Coding of several statements which were shared by the interviewees in reference to their observation of students’ social and emotional characteristics upon returning to the classroom resulted in 9 categories with 58 subcategories. A complete listing of the categories and subcategories, along with the identified emerging themes are given below in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3

*Code Categories, Subcategories and Emerging Themes*

Categories	Subcategories	Emerging Themes
Social deficits	Inability to make eye contact Inability to maintain conversation Inability to recognize social standards Lack of engagement Refusal to speak publicly Refusal to participate in social activities Refusal to respond	Disengaged
Emotional deficits	Emotional outbursts Inappropriate emotional expression Attempts to isolate Reduced feelings of trust Reduced feelings of control Expressed sadness Expressed anger Expressed anxiousness	Inability to regulate emotion
Undeveloped character traits	Lack of work ethic Lack of motivation Refusal to meet classroom expectations Refusal to follow specified rules No desire to learn Unmet age-appropriate standards	Unmotivated
Loss of identity	Poor hygiene Dress code violations Difficulty fitting in Transitioning gender Transitioning sexuality Frequent drug use	Unstable sense of self
Behavioral concerns	Increased impulsivity Increased aggressive behavior	Increased impulsivity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased vandalism</li> <li>Increased sexual activity</li> <li>Increased drug use</li> <li>Hypervigilance</li> </ul>	
Expectations of the educational environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor attendance</li> <li>Skipping classes</li> <li>Arriving late</li> <li>Incomplete classwork</li> <li>Incomplete homework</li> <li>Poor grades</li> </ul>	Inability to enforce expectations
Barriers/distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cell phones</li> <li>Social media</li> <li>Technology</li> <li>Reduced opportunity to socialize</li> <li>Inconsistency of expectations</li> <li>Removal of consequences</li> <li>Lack of safety</li> </ul>	Barriers to an effective learning environment
Classroom culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teacher to student interaction in class</li> <li>Teacher to student interaction outside of class</li> <li>Classroom seating arrangements</li> <li>Classroom communication tasks</li> <li>Lack of SEL curriculum</li> <li>Collaboration with other educators</li> <li>Clearly defining boundaries/expectations</li> </ul>	Unsupported attempts to repair classroom culture
Implementation of curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Independent learning/self-paced</li> <li>Alternating schedules</li> <li>Distance-based learning platforms</li> <li>Lack of time management skills</li> <li>Underdeveloped technology-based skills</li> </ul>	Ambivalence/wide-spread inconsistencies

While the researcher remained intentional in maintaining their attitude of Epochè, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) note the unavoidable influence of the researcher's annotations. Emery and Anderson (2020) propose that researchers accept this process as a dialog between the emerging themes and the researcher's own experience or previously held knowledge of the phenomenon. The priority of this stage was to establish a hermeneutic circle in which each part can be interpreted within the whole, and the whole can be interpreted by the part (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

## Seeking Relationships and Clustering Themes

Drawing from Moustakas' (1994) clustering and thematizing process, the researcher was able to identify and label several connections between emerging themes within the data. Grouping thematic statements by their conceptual similarity or commonality allowed the researcher to further organize, or cluster, the emerging themes within the descriptive or interpretive framework (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In thoroughly revisiting the individual transcripts and each of the codes that had been developed for categorizing participant statements or shared experiences, the researcher was then able to begin clustering the emerging themes (Smith, 2012). As relevant themes and subthemes were brought to the surface, the researcher then de-constructed and further condensed each of the thematic phrases and relevant statements until reaching the core essence of the participants shared lived experiences (Alase, 2017).

This final review of the transcripts also ensured that the researcher had reached data saturation, referring to the point in which no new data was found (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Though data saturation demonstrates the “*gold standard*” in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006), van Manen (2014) reminds researchers that saturation is not the primary objective of a phenomenological study. Throughout the current phenomenological study, the researcher sought saturation, with an aim to collect an accurate and comprehensive description of the instructors' lived experiences regarding their observed social and emotional development of their students (Boddy, 2016).

**Organization of the data.** The aim of the current study was to explore public educators' lived experiences regarding their observation of students' social and emotional development in relation to the transition between online learning environments and the traditional face-to-face classroom environment. In response to a series of open-ended semi-structured one-to-one



interview questions, participants provided an in-depth description of their observations and experiences within each educational setting. Within the initial coding of the transcripts, two core thematic labels were developed. These labels were identified in reference to the educators' shared experiences and observations of their students' social and emotional development during Washington state's mandated transition between online and traditional learning environments following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The thematic labels included: (A) How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment, and (B) How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. Individual participant responses which pertained to the transitioning public education environment and the observed social and emotional development of students within the transitioning public education environment is aligned within the two comprehensive categories. In such, the organization of the individual themes and of the essence of their experience of the transitioning learning environment and students' social and emotional development in a transitioning learning environment is aligned within the two thematic labels.

Presented first is thematic label (A) How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment. The descriptive response of each participant provided an in-depth exploration and retrospective reflection of their experience in transitioning between an online and traditional learning environment. Two emergent themes and four subthemes are discussed under this thematic label: (1) Loss of authority; (1a) inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment; (1b) barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment; (1c) unsupported

attempts to rebuild an academic culture; (2) lack of structure in the educational environment; and (2b) ambivalence/wide-spread inconsistency.

Presented next is thematic label (B) How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. This label encompasses the participants' experiences specific to the observation of their students' social and emotional development, which was discussed in reference to meeting the common core standards set forth by Washington state's Office of Superintendent of Public Education and in comparison to their retrospective observation of students in academic years prior to mandated online instruction. The third emergent theme of (3) declining mental health presents five subthemes: (3a) Disengaged; (3b) inability to regulate emotion; (3c) lack of motivation; (3d) unstable sense of self; and (3e) increased impulsivity.

The essences captured within the two thematic labels are presented in accordance with the participants' described experiences throughout the one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The resulting thematic sequence is described as a loss of authority, a lack of structure in the educational environment, and the declining mental health of students. The results are organized in a manner consistent with this sequence.

## **Results**

Analysis of the data collected revealed three themes which answer the two research questions. Two themes answered the first research question: How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments? One theme answered the second research question: How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students

following participation in an online classroom environment? The problem statement - In modifying the delivery of the common core learning model, the potential impact on student outcomes regarding consistency of both academic and social emotional standards is not yet known – provided the basis for the two thematic categories. The two thematic categories included:

1. How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment.
2. How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development.

The first thematic label includes two emergent themes and four subthemes which capture the essence of (A) How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment: (1) Loss of authority; (1a) inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment; (1b) barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment; (1c) unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture; (2) lack of structure in the educational environment; and (2a) ambivalence/wide-spread inconsistency.

The second thematic label includes one emergent theme and five subthemes which capture the essence of (B) How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development: (1) Declining mental health; (1a) disengaged; (1b) inability to regulate emotion; (1c) lack of motivation; (1d) unstable sense of self; and (1e) increased

impulsivity. Table 4.4 presents the thematic data and frequency of which each theme was encountered among the eight participants.

Table 4.4

*Thematic Labels and Frequency of Themes*

<b>Thematic Label</b>	<b>Prevalent Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
How public educators experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment	Loss of authority	Inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment	8 (100%)
		Barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment	8 (100%)
	Lack of structure in the educational environment	Unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture	7 (88%)
		Ambivalence/widespread inconsistency	7 (88%)
How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development	Declining mental health	Disengaged	8 (100%)
		Inability to regulate emotion	6 (75%)
		Lack of motivation	7 (88%)
		Unstable sense of self	5 (63%)
		Increased impulsivity	6 (75%)

The first thematic category captures the participants' descriptions of how they experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment. Their statements and expressions were reduced to two common themes and four subthemes. These themes are significant in that they provide a description of the lived experience of at least one public educator. Additionally, the frequency in which these themes occurred in the participants' described experiences indicate a shared experience of the transition from an online learning environment to a traditional face-to-face learning environment.

The second thematic category captures the participants' descriptions of how they experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. Their statements and expressions were reduced to one common theme and five subthemes. This theme and each of the subthemes are significant in that they capture a shared experience and observation of a generalized decline of students' mental health. Although every participant indicated a generalized concern for the declining mental health and wellbeing of their students, each participant reported a unique series of observations and evidence pertaining to their concerns.

**Thematic label one: How educators have experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment.**

The participants' description of their experiences in transitioning from an online learning environment to a traditional learning environment provided a substantial collection of data. Two invariant themes and four sub themes emerged from the data. The themes and sub themes are as follows (frequency of shared occurrence noted in parentheses):

1. Loss of authority
  - a) Inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment (100%)
  - b) Barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment (100%)
  - c) Unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture (88%)
2. Lack of structure in the educational environment
  - a) Ambivalence/widespread inconsistency (88%)

**Emergent theme one: Loss of authority.**

*Discussion of theme.* The first invariant theme related to how participants experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face

learning environment was due to a loss of authority regarding the educators' role in the classroom. The experienced loss of authority was described by all eight of the participants, with reference to three subthemes including the inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment, the presence of barriers which prevented maintenance of an effective learning environment and feeling unsupported in their attempts to rebuild a positive academic culture.

The participants described specific unmet expectations regarding attendance, tardiness, incomplete work, and failing grades. There was a shared experience of the inability to maintain an effective learning environment due to cell phones, social media, lack of consequences, and lack of physical safety in the classroom. Additionally, deficits regarding the classroom culture were reported with participants describing a series of individual attempts to repair the culture despite a lack of campus wide or district wide support.

*Relationship to existing body of knowledge.* This emergent was not documented in the existing research literature reviewed in Chapter 2. While similar research of student outcomes in an online learning environment has indicated themes and subthemes which parallel those of the present study, the previously emerging themes demonstrate the impact of environmental concerns of capacity and differentiation (Swanson et al., 2020) and reveal social challenges related to student and educator resistance and misunderstood intentions (Smith & Thier, 2017). In such, loss of authority is a novel theme describing the shared lived experiences and observations of the public educators who participated in the present study.

*Evidence of theme.* Each of the 8 participants indicated a loss of authority following the transition between online and traditional learning environments, noting that the loss occurred during periods of mandated online learning and was never restored upon returning to the traditional learning environment. The participants' shared experiences were captured within

three subthemes including the inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment, and unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture. For example, participant WS2022P012 described an inability to enforce classroom expectations such as completing work noting “there are no consequences, we can’t give a failing grade and the students know that, so they just choose not to do the work”.

Participant WS2022P002 explained that even when students are offered accommodations such as alternative assignments or projects of lesser difficulty “they refuse to participate at all, and there is nothing I can do about it”.

All of the participants further described barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment, and primarily attributed these barriers to cell phones and electronics in the classroom. For example, participant WS2022P001 described barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment regarding student safety due to “constant physical fights, and even more bullying and harassing students through social media throughout the school day” and participant WS2022P004 shared barriers regarding academic cheating noting “we can’t take their cell phones or laptops, even during exams, so they just look up the answers or cheat off of one another”.

Most of the participants also discussed concerns related to their unsupported attempts to rebuild the academic culture. Participant WS2022P009 shared that the school had hired support staff to intervene with challenging student behaviors, adding “but I have never actually seen them on campus and never got any information about how to contact them or find them when I need classroom support”. Participant WS2022P011 noted that the district had announced the addition of curricula and resources to address the academic culture yet shared that “we are given a worksheet about anti-bullying or something once a month to do with our students, and then

there are no instructions or activities, so we have to come up with something off the top of our head just to say we did it”. Participant WS2022P001 shared that “we have to have officers standing outside of the restrooms because the of the violence... students are scared to even go to the bathroom during the day”.

*Relationship to conceptual framework.* The shared theme of loss of authority is consistent with theories identified in the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2 of the present study. The conceptual framework reviewed included that of Vygotsky’s (1934, 1978/1987) Zone of Proximal Development theory and Construal-level Theory (Trope et al., 2021). Of note, Vygotsky references the necessity of guided social and emotional instruction during adolescence in relation to the learners’ capacity to internalize and build upon an acquired skillset. This theoretic framework suggests the participants’ described experiences of unenforced academic expectations, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment and unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture to be indicative of declining cognitive functioning and diminished social interaction.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory is built upon the concept of assisted learning which allows the learner to achieve their developmental potential (Wass & Golding, 2014). Each of the participants in the current study described their recent experiences of teaching as experiences in which they have been unable to uphold or enforce their role in leading students toward their developmental potential.

Eun (2019) further describes active processing and negotiation as key indicators of collaborative participation, which is necessary in leading the learner toward becoming an independent user of the knowledge. Participants of the current study were consistent in their described experiences of a lack of participation throughout the educational environment.



**Emergent theme two: Lack of structure in the educational environment.**

*Discussion of theme.* The second invariant theme shared amongst the participants was a lack of structure in the educational environment. This theme was identified by seven of the eight participants, with reference to one subtheme of ambivalence or widespread inconsistencies in the implementation of curricula. The participants shared concerns regarding the sudden shift to independent or self-paced learning, alternating or inconsistent course schedules, unfamiliar distance-based learning platforms and underdeveloped technology-based skills amongst the students and the instructors.

*Relationship to existing body of knowledge.* The emergent theme of a lack of structure in the educational environment was found to be consistent with the existing literature which was reviewed in Chapter 2. Polikoff (2017) discussed similar themes and subthemes regarding instructional barriers, lack of aligned expectations, and difficulty of educational transitions in relation to student outcomes specific to academic success and social emotional development. The literature supported findings, that while prosocial learning environments enhance social emotional development and improve psychosocial outcomes (Yeager, 2017), the negative effects of adverse social environments during adolescence lead to inhibited social emotional development (Hagger et al., 2019) and psychological distress (Morroquin et al., 2020).

*Evidence of theme.* The majority of participants described widespread inconsistency or ambivalence in regard to having had an impact on the loss of authority in the educational environment. Participant WS2022P013 shared that “attendance isn’t even a requirement anymore... the number of absences and tardies are out of control and its impossible to catch them up to speed when they finally do come to class”. Participant WS2022P006 described their observation of inconsistency in the implementation of curricula noting that “some teachers are

still teaching, and then others are just burnt out... the students feel like if they can skate through one class, they should be able to skate through them all.”

*Relationship to conceptual framework.* The shared theme of lack of structure in the educational environment is consistent with theories identified in the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2 of the present study. The conceptual framework reviewed included that of Vygotsky’s (1934, 1978/1987) Zone of Proximal Development theory and Construal-level Theory (Trope et al., 2021). Vygotsky’s theory assumes social interaction to be a mediating function of human development, specifically looking to the cognitive and emotional processes which emerge through social interaction (Eun, 2019).

Furthermore, Construal-level Theory evaluates psychological constructs of judgement and behavior as a social function of proximity specific to the social setting (Trope et al., 2021). Each theory poses that significant changes in the social environment or changes to the adolescents’ customary social interactions have the potential to disrupt the adolescents’ necessary and customary social processes. Prior study demonstrates this type of disruption as the result of changes in the adolescents’ perceived social support and changes in their daily interactions with peers (Morroquin et al., 2020).

**Thematic label two: How educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development.** The participants’ description of their experiences regarding their students’ current state of social and emotional development resulted in a highly cohesive data set in which all of the participants shared a deep concern for the mental health and wellbeing of their students. One invariant theme with five sub themes emerged from the data. The theme and sub themes are as follows (frequency of shared occurrence noted in parentheses):

## 1. Declining mental health

- a) Disengaged (100%)
- b) Inability to regulate emotion (75%)
- c) Lack of motivation (88%)
- d) Unstable sense of self (63%)
- e) Increased impulsivity (75%)

### **Emergent theme three: Declining mental health.**

*Discussion of theme.* The third invariant theme shared amongst the participants was that of the concern for the declining mental health of students. This theme was shared by all eight participants and included five sub themes identified in reference to students' social deficits, emotional deficits, undeveloped character traits, loss of personal identity, and conduct or behavioral concerns.

Regarding social deficits, participants described their students as disengaged, noting concerns such as the inability to make or maintain eye contact, the inability to maintain casual conversation, the inability to recognize age-appropriate social standards, a lack of engagement with peers, and refusal to speak, respond, or participate in a variety of social settings. Participants further noted their students' inability to regulate emotion, describing instances of emotional outbursts, inappropriate emotional expression, self-isolation, distrust of authority, and uncontrolled expression of sadness, anger, or anxiousness. Referencing character traits, participants described their students as unmotivated noting a lack of work ethic and a refusal to follow the rules. Students' loss of identity was heavily discussed in relation to an unstable sense of self and concerns regarding age-appropriate hygiene, overt dress code violations, and attempts to fit in resulting in sudden transitions in gender preference and sexual orientation, and a

significant increase in adolescent drug use both on and off campus. Finally, shared concerns regarding student conduct and deviant behaviors were noted by several of the participants in describing their students' demonstration of increased impulsivity. Evidence of this sub theme was discussed in relation to an increase of aggressive behavior in the classroom, an increase of vandalism, significant increase of sexual activity and drug use, and an increased sense of hypervigilance or reactive distress to otherwise normal events.

*Relationship to the existing body of knowledge.* The participants' described experiences or observations of students' declining mental health were discussed in reference to each of the subthemes including being disengaged, the inability to regulate emotion, students' lack of motivation, students' unstable sense of self and increased impulsivity. These shared experiences are consistent with findings from previous studies, such as Ford's (2021) study in which a consistent pattern between online social environments and a decline in well-being was identified. The study further found that socially distant environments were associated with decreased mood, decreased efficacy in managing stress, decreased perception of social support, withdraw from interpersonal interaction, increased symptoms of physical illness, and decreased health related behaviors such as diet, exercise, and spiritual practices. Previous study of online learning environments has also revealed the impact on student outcomes regarding self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication in learning (Wei & Chou, 2020).

*Evidence of theme.* The invariant theme of declining mental health captures five subthemes of being disengaged, the inability to regulate emotion, students' lack of motivation, students' unstable sense of self and increased impulsivity. Participants' experiences of student disengagement was expressed by all eight of the participants. For example, participant WS2022P004 stated "I try to get them to practice making eye contact, especially when someone

is speaking to the class or presenting, but they won't even look up or take their ear buds out to acknowledge anyone else in the room". Similarly, participant WS2022P012 shared "students don't even walk around in the halls together, it's so quiet out there and they are all just passing by each other but in their own worlds".

Six of the eight participants described their students' inability to regulate emotion, noting frequent emotional outbursts. Regarding emotion regulation, participant WS2022P002 shared "I have never had so many students just yell at me and it's happening over things that are completely normal, like giving a homework assignment... students feel that it is unfair or like I am just trying to waste their time with homework, and they are just immediately irritated, and they want the whole class to know it". For many students, anxiousness seemed to be an unregulated emotion, for example participant WS2022P009 discussed "I have had a lot of tears this year. Students seem overwhelmed all the time, and then you'll look over and it's like there is always someone crying. It is hard to know any more if we should ask what is wrong or just let them cry or ask if they want to go talk to the counselor".

Nearly all of the participants noted their students' lack of motivation. Participant WS2022P006 spoke of prior years regarding student athletes' requirements for attendance and grades in order to play, stating "you can't even use sports to motivate these kids, they could care less if they have to sit the bench". Participant WS2022P004 shared that she had purchased alarm clocks for some of her students that say they can't get up on time for school, and shared "even with the alarm clock, they just make another excuse about why they can't wake up on time... I tell them that they have to actually want to be here, or nothing is going to wake them up".

Many of the participants also noted a seemingly unstable sense of self amongst their students. Discussions captured many shared experiences of sudden changes in sexual orientation

or even gender preference. Participant WS2022P011 stated “it seems like they are all trying to find some sort of identity, but none of it is making any sense... guys that I have watched have girlfriends and go to homecoming and appear very straight will just come in one day and decide that they are not straight and it’s like they try to take on this new identity that you never saw coming... I’ve watched kids make those changes or those decisions before, it just seems like before it would happen over time and now it’s like it changes from one day to the next”.

Similarly, participant WS2022P001 noted that “students who have never been in trouble and have always hung around certain kids will just show up to school one day with a totally different friend group and then you see them smoking pot on the soccer field or something and you just have to wonder how that even happened”.

Finally, the majority of participants noted increased impulsivity amongst students. For example, participant WS2022P013 discussed their concern for student, noting “it has become a daily thing now, we used to have these major issues with drugs and alcohol a few times a year... this year kids are smoking pot and vaping and selling drugs and showing up to class drunk”. As another safety concern, participant WS2022P001 shared that “there are constantly fights on campus and they are not small, not scuffles... we have seen serious injuries this year from students fighting and then even off campus with students in stabbings and shootings”.

*Relationship to conceptual framework.* The shared theme of declining mental health as the result of socially distant learning environments is consistent with the theories identified in the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2 of the present study. The conceptual framework reviewed included that of Vygotsky’s (1934, 1978/1987) Zone of Proximal Development theory and Construal-level Theory (Trope et al., 2021). During adolescence, the developing self-concept is dependent upon a social comparison process in which the adolescent engages in comparing

their own skills, values and traits to those of their peers (Berk, 2019). The Zone of Proximal Development theory further addresses the cognitive and emotional processes specific to those which occur during social interactions (Eun, 2019). Similarly, Construal-level Theory (CLT) assesses the impact of proximity as it relates to an individual's emotional and executive regulation (Trope et al., 2021). Aligning with these theories, literature supports that adolescents who have had limited social interaction and have been restricted from participation in their traditional learning environment with peers have experienced impaired sociability and psychological processes such as emotional intelligence and empathy (Waytz & Gray, 2018). The experiences described by the participants of the current study are consistent with the framework provided by each of these theories.

### **Summary**

The two research questions proposed in the current study were: (1) How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments? (2) How have public educators experienced the social and emotional development of their students following participation in an online learning environment? Using Moustakas' (1994) modified version of Van Kaam's method of analysis of phenomenological data, two thematic labels emerged offering a summary of the participants' experiences: (A) How educators have experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment; and (B) How educators have experienced the social emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social emotional development. Within these two thematic labels, three themes and nine sub themes emerged from the described experiences of the eight participants.

Of the three themes and nine sub themes, two themes described how participants experienced the transition from online learning environments to the traditional learning environment. These themes were labeled (1) loss of authority and (2) lack of structure in the educational environment. Furthermore, these thematic labels included sub themes of: inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment, and supported attempts to rebuild an academic culture, and ambivalence or inconsistency within the educational environment.

One theme and five sub themes addressed how educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. This thematic label was identified as declining mental health and included five sub themes of: disengaged, inability to regulate emotion, lack of motivation, and stable sense of self, and increased impulsivity. In total, three themes and nine somethings captured the shared experiences of the 8 participants and provided insight regarding the problem statement: In modifying the delivery of the common core learning model, the potential impact on student outcomes regarding consistency of both academic and social emotional standards is not yet known.

The results of this research explore the experiences and observations of 8 participants within the criteria-based purposeful sample population who have experienced the transition between teaching online and teaching in a traditional classroom environment within the public education system of Washington state during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the present study, the researcher made every effort to minimize researcher bias and ensure the trustworthiness of the study through appropriate preparation, thorough data gathering and analysis processes, and an accurate presentation of this study. The qualitative software program NVivo12 was used in the



initial coding of the transcripts and analysis of the data. Furthermore, the data consisted of verbatim transcripts of the one-to-one semi-structured interviews of 8 participants using open ended questions and probing questions to explore depth or clarify meaning when appropriate. Data analysis was performed using Van Kaam's method of phenomenological data analysis as modified by Moustakas (1994). Chapter 5 provides an additional summary of the present study and discussion of the findings, including implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Overview

Over the last 3 academic years in Washington state, students and educators in public schools have experienced transitioning learning environments as mandated by the state in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, public schools were closed, with mandated social distancing going into effect across the state to limit all other social interactions such as religious gatherings and extra-curricular activities. According to the student enrollment records which are monitored by the Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM), the mandate affected more than 1.1 million students within Washington state's public education system. For the first time in over 20 years, the OFM has also reported a decline in student enrollment for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic terms following the pandemic and associated online learning mandates. The number of students affected by this adverse environmental shift and the effects of limited opportunities for adolescents' social and emotional development during the social distancing mandate is the impetus for the current study.

The review of applicable literature and prior research noted in Chapter 2 discusses a significant amount of literature depicting the need for adolescent social and emotional engagement as well as the necessity of a well-structured pro-social academic environment. Still, further study is needed to explore the consequences of a shifting academic environment. While studies have shown that student-centered learning models enhance student motivation and contribute to academic achievement in an online environment (Regmi & Jones, 2020), the constructive application of student-centered models in an online learning environment must include a thorough assessment of the instructors' attitude, aptitude and needs (Scoppio & Luyt, 2017).

Previous research also looks to variables such as the educational environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) and the pace of curricula implementation (Andriette & Su, 2018) to establish a relationship between the educational model and student outcomes. While Li, et al. (2020) demonstrate a positive correlation between academic achievement and student-instructor relationships regarding accessibility and feedback, the impact of these variables on student social emotional development within an online classroom remains unknown. A research gap was found in that it is unknown how educators have experienced the impact of an online learning environment as it relates to the expected or required social and emotional development of their students.

Prior study has confirmed that social emotional factors contribute to student outcomes, specifically regarding participation, perception and student interaction or engagement. While student perception has been shown to influence self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication (Wei & Chou, 2020), direct communication and interaction between students and instructors has been shown to influence student outcomes regarding academic achievement and social emotional development (Tanis, 2020).

The purpose of the current descriptive qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public educators regarding the observed social and emotional development of students in the traditional classroom setting following participation in a mandated online classroom environment. Two research questions guided this study: (1) How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments? (2) How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in an online classroom environment?

Data was gathered from a criteria-based purposeful sample population of 8 participants through one-to-one semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions and follow-up probing questions as needed. A transcript of each interview was produced and analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological framework which supports descriptive and interpretive methods of analyses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The current study used Moustakas (1994) modification of Van Kaam's method of descriptive phenomenological analysis following the guidelines of interpretive phenomenological analysis in utilizing a standardized process of description, reduction, and interpretation. This analysis revealed three invariant themes and nine subthemes under two thematic labels describing the experiences of public educators who participated in providing mandated instruction online during the pandemic and have since transitioned back to the traditional classroom setting.

The current study contributes additional understanding to the body of research regarding student outcomes in an online learning environment. The study is unique in that it was specifically designed to consider the educators' perspectives which was not found in any other qualitative study addressing student outcomes in an online environment.

Chapter 5 is a summary of the current study and includes a discussion of the findings, notes the conclusions, and identifies the implications. Recommendations for further research is also included in Chapter 5. It is the researcher's hope that the practical implications and recommendations for further research will provide a deeper understanding of the ways public educators and students can be supported in ensuring that the academic environment provides adequate social and emotional support to ensure the standards of social emotional learning are met.

## Summary of Findings

Findings of this study describe the experiences and observations of 8 participants within the criteria-based purposeful sample population who have experienced the transition between teaching online and teaching in a traditional classroom environment within the public education system of Washington state during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of the data collected revealed three themes which answer the two research questions. Two thematic labels answered the first research question: How have public educators experienced the transition from online learning environments to face-to-face learning environments? One thematic label answered the second research question: How have public educators experienced the common core standards of social and emotional development of students following participation in an online classroom environment? The basis for each of the thematic labels were aligned with the problem statement - In modifying the delivery of the common core learning model, the potential impact on student outcomes regarding consistency of both academic and social emotional standards is not yet known.

The first thematic label includes two emergent themes and four subthemes which capture the essence of (A) How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment. Regarding the first invariant theme of loss of authority, the three subthemes included: (1a) inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment; (1b) barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment; (1c) unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture. All 8 participants indicated a loss of authority following the transition between online and traditional learning environments, noting that the loss occurred during periods of mandated online learning and was never restored upon returning to the traditional learning environment. Descriptions of these

shared experiences were captured within three subthemes including the inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment, and unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture.

The second invariant theme, lack of structure in the educational environment, included subtheme: (2a) ambivalence/wide-spread inconsistency. The majority of participants described an inconsistency across the academic environment or a widespread sense of ambivalence in regard to having had an impact on the loss of authority in the educational environment.

The second thematic label includes one emergent theme and five subthemes which capture the essence of (B) How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development: (1) Declining mental health; (1a) disengaged; (1b) inability to regulate emotion; (1c) lack of motivation; (1d) unstable sense of self; and (1e) increased impulsivity. Described experiences of student disengagement was expressed by all eight of the participants. Furthermore, participants noted their students' inability to regulate emotion, a lack of student motivation, an unstable sense of self amongst their students, and an increase of student impulsivity regarding behavioral deficits and risky behaviors.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The first thematic category captures the participants' descriptions of how they experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment. Their statements and expressions were reduced to two common themes and four subthemes. These themes are significant in that they provide a description of the lived experiences of public educators. Additionally, the frequency in which these themes occurred in the participants' described experiences indicate a shared experience of

the transition from an online learning environment to a traditional face-to-face learning environment.

The second thematic category captures the participants' descriptions of how they experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. Their statements and expressions were reduced to one common theme and five subthemes. This theme and each of the subthemes are significant in that they capture a shared experience and observation of a generalized decline of students' mental health. Although every participant indicated a generalized concern for the declining mental health and wellbeing of their students, each participant reported a unique series of observations and evidence pertaining to their concerns.

**How educators have experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment.** The participants' description of their experiences in transitioning from an online learning environment to a traditional learning environment provided a substantial collection of data. Two invariant themes of loss of authority and lack of structure in the educational environment and four sub themes emerged from the data.

*Emergent theme one: Loss of authority.* The first invariant theme related to how participants experienced the transition of returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment was due to a loss of authority regarding the educators' role in the classroom. The experienced loss of authority was described by all eight of the participants, with reference to three subthemes including the inability to enforce expectations of the learning environment, the presence of barriers which prevented

maintenance of an effective learning environment and feeling unsupported in their attempts to rebuild a positive academic culture.

The participants described specific unmet expectations regarding attendance, tardiness, incomplete work, and failing grades. There was a shared experience of the inability to maintain an effective learning environment due to cell phones, social media, lack of consequences, and lack of physical safety in the classroom. Additionally, deficits regarding the classroom culture were reported with participants describing a series of individual attempts to repair the culture despite a lack of campus wide or district wide support.

This emergent was not documented in the existing research literature reviewed in Chapter 2. While similar research of student outcomes in an online learning environment has indicated themes and subthemes which parallel those of the present study, the previously emerging themes demonstrate the impact of environmental concerns of capacity and differentiation (Swanson et al., 2020) and reveal social challenges related to student and educator resistance and misunderstood intentions (Smith & Thier, 2017). In such, loss of authority is a novel theme describing the shared lived experiences and observations of the public educators who participated in the present study.

The conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2 provides insight into the findings of the first emergent theme of loss of authority. Of note, Vygotsky references the necessity of guided social and emotional instruction during adolescence in relation to the learners' capacity to internalize and build upon an acquired skillset. This theoretic framework suggests the participants' described experiences of unenforced academic expectations, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment and unsupported attempts to rebuild an academic culture to be indicative of declining cognitive functioning and diminished social interaction.



Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory is built upon the concept of assisted learning which allows the learner to achieve their developmental potential (Wass & Golding, 2014). Eun (2019) further describes active processing and negotiation as key indicators of collaborative participation, which is necessary in leading the learner toward becoming an independent user of the knowledge. Participants in the current study described their experiences in being unable to uphold or enforce their role in leading students toward their developmental potential and a resulting lack of student participation in the learning environment.

*Emergent theme two: Lack of structure in the educational environment.* The second invariant theme shared amongst the participants was a lack of structure in the educational environment. This theme was identified by seven of the eight participants, with reference to one subtheme of ambivalence or widespread inconsistencies in the implementation of curricula. The participants shared concerns regarding the sudden shift to independent or self-paced learning, alternating or inconsistent course schedules, unfamiliar distance-based learning platforms and underdeveloped technology-based skills amongst the students and the instructors.

The emergent theme of a lack of structure in the educational environment was found to be consistent with the existing literature which was reviewed in Chapter 2. Polikoff (2017) discussed similar themes and subthemes regarding instructional barriers, lack of aligned expectations, and difficulty of educational transitions in relation to student outcomes specific to academic success and social emotional development. The literature supported findings, that while prosocial learning environments enhance social emotional development and improve psychosocial outcomes (Yeager, 2017), the negative effects of adverse social environments during adolescence lead to inhibited social emotional development (Hagger et al., 2019) and psychological distress (Morroquin et al., 2020).

The conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2 provides insight into the findings of the second emergent theme of a lack of structure in the academic environment. Vygotsky's theory assumes social interaction to be a mediating function of human development, specifically looking to the cognitive and emotional processes which emerge through social interaction (Eun, 2019). Similarly, Construal-level Theory evaluates psychological constructs of judgement and behavior as a social function of proximity specific to the social setting (Trope et al., 2021). Each theory poses that significant changes in the social environment or changes to the adolescents' customary social interactions have the potential to disrupt the adolescents' necessary and customary social processes. Prior study demonstrates this type of disruption as the result of changes in the adolescents' perceived social support and changes in their daily interactions with peers (Morroquin et al., 2020).

The current study reflects a biblical foundation which has been identified as two constructs of Christianity. One of these constructs is noted as God's will that Christians come together to encourage one another, not neglecting to meet with one another (Hebrews 10:24-25, ESV). Similar to the Common Core public education models which employ social and emotional learning requirements, biblical principles demonstrate a Christian model of social and emotional standards. The identified social emotional learning standards include self-awareness, self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, social management, and social engagement. During adolescence, autonomy and peer influence affect the adolescents' view of religion and associated beliefs (Estrada et al., 2019). While God's Word reveals the necessity of social opportunities in building upon faith, practicing and demonstrating God's will, and exercising spiritual gifts, the participants' described experiences indicated a significant disruption within the social structure and social opportunities of the classroom.

**How educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development.** The participants' description of their experiences regarding their students' current state of social and emotional development resulted in a highly cohesive data set in which all of the participants shared a deep concern for the mental health and wellbeing of their students. One invariant theme of declining mental health with five sub themes indicating the symptoms or effects of declining mental health emerged from the data.

*Emergent theme three: Declining mental health.* The third invariant theme shared amongst the participants was that of the concern for the declining mental health of students. This theme was shared by all eight participants and included five sub themes identified in reference to (1) students' social deficits, (2) emotional deficits, (3) undeveloped character traits, (4) loss of personal identity, and (5) conduct or behavioral concerns.

Regarding social deficits, participants described their students as disengaged, noting concerns such as the inability to make or maintain eye contact, the inability to maintain casual conversation, the inability to recognize age-appropriate social standards, a lack of engagement with peers, and refusal to speak, respond, or participate in a variety of social settings. Participants further noted their students' inability to regulate emotion, describing instances of emotional outbursts, inappropriate emotional expression, self-isolation, distrust of authority, and uncontrolled expression of sadness, anger, or anxiousness. Referencing character traits, participants described their students as unmotivated noting a lack of work ethic and a refusal to follow the rules. Students' loss of identity was heavily discussed in relation to an unstable sense of self and concerns regarding age-appropriate hygiene, overt dress code violations, and attempts to fit in resulting in sudden transitions in gender preference and sexual orientation, and a

significant increase in adolescent drug use both on and off campus. Finally, shared concerns regarding student conduct and deviant behaviors were noted by several of the participants in describing their students' demonstration of increased impulsivity. Evidence of this sub theme was discussed in relation to an increase of aggressive behavior in the classroom, an increase of vandalism, significant increase of sexual activity and drug use, and an increased sense of hypervigilance or reactive distress to otherwise normal events.

The participants' described experiences or observations of students' declining mental health were discussed in reference to each of the subthemes including being disengaged, the inability to regulate emotion, students' lack of motivation, students' unstable sense of self and increased impulsivity. These shared experiences are consistent with findings from previous studies, such as Ford's (2021) study in which a consistent pattern between online social environments and a decline in well-being was identified. The study further found that socially distant environments were associated with decreased mood, decreased efficacy in managing stress, decreased perception of social support, withdraw from interpersonal interaction, increased symptoms of physical illness, and decreased health related behaviors such as diet, exercise and spiritual practices. Previous study of online learning environments has also revealed the impact on student outcomes regarding self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication in learning (Wei & Chou, 2020).

The conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2 provides insight into the findings of the third emergent theme of declining mental health as the result of socially distant learning environments. During adolescence, the developing self-concept is dependent upon a social comparison process in which the adolescent engages in comparing their own skills, values and traits to those of their peers (Berk, 2019). While the Zone of Proximal Development theory

further addresses the cognitive and emotional processes specific to those which occur during social interactions (Eun, 2019), Construal-level Theory (CLT) assesses the impact of proximity as it relates to an individual's emotional and executive regulation (Trope et al., 2021).

Adolescents who have had limited social interaction and have been restricted from participation in their traditional learning environment with peers have experienced impaired sociability and psychological processes such as emotional intelligence and empathy (Waytz & Gray, 2018).

A second construct of Christianity reflected in the biblical foundation of this study is the desire of Christ that Christians maintain a sense of self-worth, as it is His intention that Christians come to learn who they are in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). As adolescents seek to understand and establish a sense of self, they are confronted with conflicting views of the secular world and the kingdom of God. While our public educators aim to provide education in a safe and relevant environment, secular demands often confuse perspectives regarding what is good and moral (Estrada et al., 2019) and contribute to the adolescents' evolving sense of mortality and sound judgement (Joshi et al., 2008). Though scripture demonstrates the significance of self-worth and urges Christians to have confidence in their security in Christ, the participants' experiences of their students' declining mental health indicate impaired sociability and psychological processes.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study have provided insight regarding the academic environment and the social emotional development of students. Specially, the study has highlighted declines specific to the loss of authority or structure of the classroom and to the declining mental health of the students within the classroom. The current study has advanced the body of knowledge regarding student outcomes in a shifting academic environment by exploring the exploring the

lived experiences and observations of the educator rather than that of the student. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed in the following sections.

**Theoretical Implications.** The conceptual framework defined in Chapter 2 included that of Vygotsky's (1934, 1978/1987) Zone of Proximal Development theory and Construal-level Theory (Trope et al., 2021). Each theory provides insight into the findings of this study, posing that significant changes in the social environment or of social interactions have the potential to disrupt the adolescents' social processes. Prior study demonstrates this disruption in relation to changes in the adolescents' perceived social support daily interactions with peers (Morroquin et al., 2020), and further indicates that limited social interaction and restricted participation in the learning environment contributes to impaired sociability and psychological processes (Waytz & Gray, 2018).

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory is built upon the concept of assisted learning which allows the learner to achieve their developmental potential (Wass & Golding, 2014). ZPD references the necessity of guided social and emotional instruction during adolescence in relation to the learners' capacity to internalize and build upon an acquired skillset.

Construal-level Theory (CLT) evaluates psychological constructs of judgement and behavior as a social function of proximity specific to the social setting and assesses the impact of proximity as it relates to an individual's emotional and executive regulation (Trope et al., 2021). During adolescence, the developing self-concept is dependent upon a social comparison process in which the adolescent engages in comparing their own skills, values and traits to those of their peers (Berk, 2019).

The findings of this study were presented as three themes and nine subthemes under the thematic labels of (1) How public educators experienced the transition in returning from an

online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment; and (2) How public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development. The thematic labels aligned with and provided answers to the two research questions that guided the study. Two of the themes and four subthemes described how public educators experienced the transition in returning from an online learning environment to the traditional face-to-face learning environment. The third theme and five subthemes described how public educators have experienced the social and emotional development of their students in relation to those defined by the common core standards of social and emotional development.

The first emergent theme of the present study describing the experiences of the participants was a loss of authority. This theme was not found in the relevant literature or prior research reviewed in Chapter 2 and is considered to be a unique finding of the current study. While the framework of the current study offered some rationale regarding the onset of the experience, it was not fully explained in regard to the identified subthemes regarding the ongoing inability to enforce expectations, barriers to maintaining an effective learning environment and the inability to rebuild the academic culture now that proximity in the educational environment has been regained.

The second emergent theme of the present study describing the experiences of the participants was a lack of structure in the academic environment. This theme was found to be consistent with the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2, including findings regarding instructional barriers, lack of aligned expectations, and difficulty of educational transitions in relation to student outcomes specific to academic success and social emotional development (Polikoff, 2017). These findings are also supported by the conceptual framework in that ZPD

assumes social interaction to be a mediating function of human development, specifically looking to the cognitive and emotional processes which emerge through social interaction (Eun, 2019). While prosocial learning environments enhance social emotional development and improve psychosocial outcomes (Yeager, 2017), the negative effects of adverse social environments during adolescence lead to inhibited social emotional development (Hagger et al., 2019) and psychological distress (Morroquin et al., 2020).

The third emergent theme of the present study describing the experiences of the participants was an observed decline in the mental health of their students. This theme and subthemes including being disengaged, the inability to regulate emotion, students' lack of motivation, students' unstable sense of self and increased impulsivity are consistent with findings from previous studies reviewed in Chapter 2. For example, Ford (2021) reveals a similar pattern between online social environments and a decline in adolescent well-being, demonstrating that socially distant environments were associated with decreased mood, decreased efficacy in managing stress, decreased perception of social support, withdraw from interpersonal interaction, increased symptoms of physical illness, and decreased health related behaviors such as diet, exercise and spiritual practices. Additional studies of online learning environments have also revealed the impact on student outcomes regarding self-efficacy, self-directed learning, control, motivation, and communication in learning (Wei & Chou, 2020). These findings are also supported by the conceptual framework referencing Construal-level Theory in the social function and impact of proximity as it relates to an individual's emotional and executive regulation (Trope et al., 2021).

**Practical implications.** The findings from the current study have furthered our understanding of the academic environment and the related social emotional development of



students. These findings have also led to two important implications regarding the need to re-establish an appropriate educational environment and the need to better assess the mental health of students in the public education system. These implications, if implemented in the public school setting may improve academic outcomes and social emotional learning in the academic environment.

The first practical implication is the capacity for this study to support educators' efforts to regain authority and structure in the academic setting. Learning environments generally consist of one educator and several students. Without the educator's ability to express and enforce the expectations of an academic environment or the associated social standards including participation, academic integrity and attendance, students will continue to experience deficits in regard to development and achievement. A safe and effective learning environment requires a collaborative engagement between the students and their instructor.

The second practical implication is the ability of this study to increase individual, parental, and educator awareness regarding the declining mental health of students who have experienced a shift in the perceived support and frequency of social interactions in the academic environment. With so many students affected by the mandated social learning environment, mental health distress is presenting as common or normalized. Normalizing a significant decline in mental health may impose an increase of concerns related to risky behavior, self-harm or suicidal ideation, and attempted or completed suicide amongst our youth. Education regarding the assessment or screening of mental health symptoms may promote the utilization of mental health services and necessary behavioral health care.

### **Limitations**

The exploration and description of the experiences of public educators in the transition from mandated online learning to the traditional classroom environment within a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design included both strengths and weaknesses. One strength of the current study is the use of a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, which is indicated to be the most appropriate design when exploring social phenomenon, such as the learning environment (Fulmer & Frijters, 2009). Additionally, the use of semi-structured one-to-one interviews in this phenomenological research design allowed retrospective exploration, bringing meaning or meaningfulness to the participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 2017) and allowed the researcher to gain a detailed understanding to be subsequently utilized in enhancing the reviewers understanding of the phenomenon (McLeod, 2001).

While the use of a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was most appropriate regarding the current study, the concept of external validity in qualitative study is limited as compared to that of quantitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This limitation required that the researcher promote the reviewers' exploration and connection with the lived experiences of the participants (Emery & Anderman, 2020), providing a general description of the phenomenon and allowing the reviewer to develop their own perspective in connecting with the experiences of others (Giorgi, 2008).

Another limitation of the study was the use of recorded video conferencing for data collection using semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Results of the current study may have been influenced by the data collection procedures (Gibbs et al., 2007), as the use of a web-based video conferencing platform may have affected participation due to concerns related to internet access or competence in access or utilizing the platform (Archibald et al., 2019). Participation

may have been further affected by the participant's experience of discomfort in relation to being on video, or to being video recorded (Iivari, 2018).

Another limitation of the study was the use of social media for initiating a call for participation and the associated risk of participant privacy or confidentiality violations. Any use of social media indicates an increase in the risk of ethical violations related to confidentiality and participant privacy (Smith et al., 1996; Zimmer, 2010), as the researcher cannot substantially control the parameters of user privacy due to the terms and conditions specific to the social media platforms which participants have subscribed to (Hunter et al., 2018). Participants were notified verbally and in writing of the environmental expectations related to limited privacy and confidentiality (Zimmer, 2010), and all personally identifying information was kept to an absolute minimum during the initial recruiting process and was eliminated following participant selection (Smith et al., 1996).

Another limitation of the study was the researcher's lack of experience regarding data collection in relation to the ability to reach data saturation. Given inconsistencies in the literature regarding theoretical expectations or procedures for determining saturation in qualitative study, novice researchers often face challenges in achieving data saturation (Boddy, 2016; Bowen, 2008). Though saturation is not the primary objective of phenomenological study (van Manen, 2014), the study utilized research-informed open-ended questions and follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) within each participant interview to ensure a significant depth of understanding.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study revealed three shared themes describing the experiences of public educators regarding the outcome of a transitioning learning environment. While their experiences

and observations have contributed to a deeper understanding of social and emotional development within the learning environment, much remains unknown about student outcomes as the direct result of socially distant learning strategies during adolescence. The recommendations for future research may contribute to a greater understanding of the developmental impacts of socially distant learning environments and strategies. They may also provide insight for educators and administrators within the public education setting regarding the social and emotional needs of students and concepts regarding ways these needs can be better supported.

The first recommendation for future research addresses the need to establish any existing correlation between the variables present in a socially distant learning environment and measurable student outcomes. To identify these correlations, a study which follows a mixed methods design to gather both qualitative and quantitative data could be useful. The study could use two groups of sample populations with one group consisting of students who completed their public high school education in a traditional learning environment and a second group consisting of students who transitioned between mandated online learning environments and traditional learning environments. The experiences of each sample population could be compared in an effort to assess for any relevant factors within or between their described experiences and measured variables related to social and emotional development during adolescence.

A second recommendation for future research is based on a restricted demographic and geographic location and not knowing if findings from the current study are specific to the public education system within Washington state, or if these findings can be generalizable across state lines. A study which replicates the design and data analysis procedures of the current study in another state would capture a different demographic and may provide insight regarding the

transferability of the findings within the current study. It may further provide insight of public educators' lived experiences and student outcomes in an alternate geographic location.

A third recommendation for future research is also based on a restricted demographic in not knowing if findings from the current study are specific to the population of educators who teach older adolescents included in the study, or if these findings can be generalizable to the experiences of those who teach younger children such as those in elementary school. A study which replicates the design and data analysis procedures of the current study yet samples a population of educators who teach a demographic of younger students may provide insight regarding the transferability of the findings within the current study. It may further provide insight of public educators' lived experiences and student outcomes in an alternate age demographic.

This study also yields recommendations for future practice. The findings of the current research may benefit those who teach or work within a public-school setting. The potential benefits include a deeper understanding of the necessity for social and emotional learning opportunities. This understanding may support educators in their efforts to recognize or contribute to their students' social and emotional development in the academic environment. Furthermore, it may encourage educators to work collaboratively with their districts or states to request and receive the necessary curricula and guidance in providing a pro-social learning environment.

### **Summary**

The current study has provided key findings regarding the public educational environment and the social emotional development of students. The described experiences of public-school educators have revealed shared experiences regarding a loss of authority and a lack

of structure within the academic setting. Implications of the study suggest the necessity for educators to be supported in the revision of the academic environment, developing a pro-social model of engagement and collaborative learning amongst students.

Furthermore, the described experiences of each participant have provided findings regarding the declining mental health of students, indicating significant risk factors such as being disengaged, unable to regulate emotion and acting on impulsivity. Implications of the study suggest an immediate need to assess the mental health of our students and establish a plan to ensure immediate access to mental health care. Collectively, supporting our educators in rebuilding an appropriate academic culture and our students in reducing symptoms of mental health distress has the potential to realign student outcomes regarding age appropriate social and emotional development in the learning environment.

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## Appendix A

### Standards, Benchmarks and Indicators

The common core model identifies social and emotional standards as well as specific benchmarks utilized to assess the students' capacity to meet the social and emotional standards when provided the appropriate environmental and instructional conditions. Each benchmark is further supported with behavioral indicators which represent the students' ability to perform under the expected benchmark. The Social Emotional Learning Indicators Workgroup has provided the following standards, benchmarks and indicators:

<b>STANDARD 1 - SELF-AWARENESS</b>	
Individual has the ability to identify their emotions, personal assets, areas for growth, and potential external resources and supports.	
Benchmark 1(a). Demonstrates awareness and understanding of one's own emotions and emotions' influence on behavior.	High School Indicators of Benchmark 1(a): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can analyze how and why an emotion can trigger behaviors in different contexts.</li> <li>• I can evaluate the impact that focusing intensely on my emotions has on me.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate the ability to analyze the effectiveness of actions I take to deal with my emotions and feelings.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate the ability to analyze, critically think about, and understand the attitudes I hold that contribute to my development of a fixed or growth mindset while dealing with challenges or meeting goals.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 1(b). Demonstrates awareness of personal and collective identity encompassing strengths, areas for growth, aspirations, and cultural and linguistic assets.	High School Indicators of Benchmark 1(b): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can identify the SEL skills and assets required to enter specific adult roles such as romantic partner, worker, or leader, and assess strength and growth opportunities necessary to prepare accordingly.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate a clear understanding of personal strengths and assets to support achievement of personal goals and aspirations.</li> <li>• I can identify how my perspective affects interactions with others, especially those who are from different cultures and live with different experiences.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 1(c). Demonstrates self-awareness and understanding of external	High School Indicators of Benchmark 1(c): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can evaluate and revise prior understandings, seek connections to my cultural stories, or formulate questions</li> </ul>

influences—e.g., culture, family, school, and community resources and supports.	<p>of interest while considering strategies within and beyond the current context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can demonstrate awareness of resources, know where to go, and with whom to connect.</li> <li>• I can assess the effectiveness of different forms of assistance in relation to personal boundaries, assets, and needs.</li> </ul>
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<b>STANDARD 2 - SELF-MANAGEMENT</b>	
Individual has the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.	
<p>Benchmark 2(a). Demonstrates the skills to manage one's emotions, thoughts, impulses, and stress in constructive ways.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 2(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can stop and think about potential consequences when strong feelings and emotions are triggered and allow those thoughts to guide responses appropriately.</li> <li>• I can gauge the feelings and emotions of others and adapt my behavior by using multiple strategies to deal with my feelings and emotions.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate my ability to analyze and adjust my role in affirming or challenging school and community rules and expectations.</li> </ul>
<p>Benchmark 2(b). Demonstrates responsible decision-making and problem-solving skills.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 2(b):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can demonstrate problem-solving and decision-making skills that use multiple viewpoints.</li> <li>• I can identify and analyze challenges, consider external perspectives (e.g., gender, culture), employ cultural storytelling to understand context, and determine potential solutions</li> </ul>

<b>STANDARD 3 - SELF-EFFICACY</b>	
Individual has the ability to motivate themselves, persevere, and see themselves as capable.	
<p>Benchmark 3(a). Demonstrates the skills to set, monitor, adapt, persevere, achieve, and evaluate goals.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 3(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can demonstrate an understanding of learning barriers, identify components of goal setting, and use strategies and adaptations that are compatible with my personal and social values.</li> <li>• I can evaluate steps taken to accomplish a task and identify areas for growth in order to achieve further success.</li> <li>• I can develop a variety of strategies to meet goals, taking into account cultural values and traditions, and assessing how my attitude negatively or positively affects meeting my goals.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can reflect on progress toward achieving goals and demonstrate the ability to make revisions as needed to address growth and build on strengths.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 3(b). Demonstrates problem-solving skills to engage responsibly in a variety of situations.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 3(b):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can analyze the short- and long-term outcomes of all behaviors and evaluate how responsible decision making improves outcomes.</li> <li>I can identify and evaluate problems in my community, embrace the discomfort, frame a growth mindset, use cultural assets, and identify how our actions led to success or failure.</li> <li>I can regularly apply problem-solving tools and understand cultural variables and strategies and can identify the strengths I have that apply to solving problems.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 3(c). Demonstrate awareness and ability to speak on behalf of personal rights and advocacy.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 3(c):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can demonstrate the ability to identify and articulate my rights regarding equality, cultural consideration, civility, political freedom, and freedom of expression for both myself and others and can demonstrate the ability to advocate for myself.</li> <li>I can demonstrate the ability to determine my role and clearly express myself when necessary to resolve conflicts with peers.</li> <li>I can analyze the components of a caring relationship and compare the qualities of a caring relationship to a relationship that may be harmful.</li> <li>I can demonstrate the ability to advocate with varied and diverse audiences in a positive and constructive manner.</li> </ul>

#### **STANDARD 4 - SOCIAL AWARENESS**

Individual has the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Benchmark 4(a). Demonstrates awareness of other people's emotions, perspectives, cultures, languages, histories, identities, and abilities.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 4(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I can reflect on the emotional impact people have on each other and demonstrate my ability to adapt my responses accordingly.</li> <li>I can evaluate how my response to a situation might affect others and can make adaptations that are influenced by understanding the cultural stories and backgrounds of others.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 4(b). Demonstrates an	High School Indicators of Benchmark 4(b):



awareness and respect for similarities and differences among community, cultural, and social groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can identify how perspectives and biases affect interactions with others and how advocacy for the rights of others contributes to the common good.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate personal reflection about the value of cultural diversity and humility and explain the differences that may exist within the same cultural group.</li> <li>• I can evaluate strategies for engaging in non-verbal and verbal communication across multiple cultures.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 4(c). Demonstrates an understanding of the variation within and across cultures.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 4(c):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can analyze social situations and show awareness that others' responses are influenced by different customs and traditions they hold.</li> <li>• I can participate in cross-cultural activities and reflect on how I was responsive and respectful to the people, the setting, and the context.</li> <li>• I can identify broader issues and unaddressed areas and consider potential implications of bias in existing information.</li> </ul>

<p><b>STANDARD 5 - SOCIAL MANAGEMENT</b> Individual has the ability to make safe and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions.</p>	
Benchmark 5(a). Demonstrates a range of communication and social skills to interact effectively with others.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 5(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can reflect on and adjust my communication style with others, practice cultural humility, and constructively respond to feedback from others about improving my communication with them.</li> <li>• I can use cooperative strategies for collaborating with peers, adults, and others in the community (e.g., acknowledge opinions, compromise, contribute, encourage, listen, and reach consensus) to move group efforts forward with awareness of the needs of everyone.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 5(b). Demonstrates the ability to identify and take steps to resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 5(b):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can apply specific conflict-resolution skills and seek out problem-solving resources (e.g., trusted adults and peer mediators).</li> <li>• I can practice solving problems in a peaceful way, but when peaceful solutions don't happen, I can analyze and understand my role and take initiative for reparation.</li> <li>• I can apply conflict-resolution skills to de-escalate, defuse, and resolve conflicts and differences.</li> </ul>
Benchmark 5(c).	High School Indicators of Benchmark 5(c):

<p>Demonstrates the ability to engage in respectful and healthy relationships with individuals with diverse perspectives, cultures, languages, histories, identities, and abilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can apply strategies for setting and keeping healthy boundaries in relationships with peers and adults.</li> <li>• I can establish and maintain relationships with people whose backgrounds and identities vary from my own while recognizing the impact of privilege and oppression.</li> <li>• I can practice strategies for engaging and maintaining constructive relationships (e.g., pursuing shared interests and activities, spending time together, giving and receiving help, practicing forgiveness).</li> </ul>
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<p><b>STANDARD 6 - SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT</b>          Individual has the ability to consider others and show a desire to contribute to the well-being of school and community.</p>	
<p>Benchmark 6(a).          Demonstrates a sense of school and community responsibility.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 6(a):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can engage in ways to improve school operation and/or community function by engaging and actively pursuing the voices and ideas of peers and adults.</li> <li>• I can use strategies based on mutual cooperation and respect to resist the social pressures that may result in marginalization and bias within my school and community.</li> <li>• I can analyze school operations from diverse perspectives and take leadership opportunities to contribute to our school/community.</li> </ul>
<p>Benchmark 6(b).          Demonstrates the ability to work with others to set, monitor, adapt, achieve, and evaluate goals.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 6(b):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can evaluate strategies for working together, underscore how advocacy for the rights of others contributes to the common good and recognize how bias can affect group dynamics.</li> <li>• I can promote equitable distribution of community resources and discern approaches, gauge dynamics, and act from an understanding of my role in group activities and interactions.</li> <li>• I can evaluate personal contributions to group effectiveness and adjust my behavior accordingly.</li> </ul>
<p>Benchmark 6(c).          Contributes productively to one's school, workplace, and community.</p>	<p>High School Indicators of Benchmark 6(c):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can work cooperatively with others to plan, implement, and evaluate projects that address identified needs and enhancements in my school, work, and local community.</li> <li>• I can demonstrate an understanding of school, work, and community cultures and actively participate in cooperative interactions to improve civic, workplace, and ethical climates.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I can analyze, promote, and advocate for civic and democratic responsibilities for promoting a healthy and clean environment.</li><li>• I can use analysis and critical-thinking skills to understand the broad impact and potential consequences of safe and risky online behaviors.</li></ul>
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## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

As you know, this study is about your observations and experiences regarding your students' social and emotional development. For the purpose of this study, we will assume your students' social and emotional development prior to COVID-19 social distancing mandates to have been "normal". This study, then, will consider your experience of your students' social and emotional development in relation to the transition between face-to-face learning environments and online learning environments.

Let's begin with a timeline of your experience as a public high school educator. As far back as you can recall, tell me about your lived experiences as they pertain to the implementation and assessment of social and emotional development in your classroom.

*Follow up questions:*

What have you noticed about the social and emotional skills of your students this year as compared to your first year of teaching?

What have you noticed about the social and emotional skills of your students this year as compared to last year?

In what year did you observe the most significant change regarding the social and emotional skills of your students?

How do you implement social and emotional learning in your classroom?

*Follow up questions:*

How has your curriculum or implementation strategy changed as compared to your first year of teaching?

How has your curriculum or implementation strategy changed as compared to last year?

How has your curriculum or implementation strategy changed regarding delivery in an online environment versus a face-to-face classroom environment?

Are there any social and emotional learning standards that you feel more competent or capable of teaching your students?

*Follow up questions:*

Are there any resources or support systems that have added to this competency or capability?

Are there any social and emotional learning standards that you feel less competent or capable of teaching your students?

*Follow up questions:*

Are there any gaps or limitations regarding resources or support systems that could otherwise improve this competency or capability?

How have your students responded to the social and emotional learning standards provided in your classroom?

*Follow up questions:*

What social and emotional skills have you experienced or observed as an improvement following the periods of mandated online learning?

What social and emotional skills have you experienced or observed as worsening following the periods of mandated online learning?

## Appendix C

### Call for Participation

**Currently seeking research participation from public educators with experience teaching in both face-to-face and online learning environments.**

This study aims to explore the experiences of high school educators in regard to the social and emotional development of high school students. Participants must be 18 years of age or older and currently employed as a public high school educator. Participants, if willing, will be asked to answer a few demographic questions followed by participation in a virtual interview with the researcher. Participant data will be kept confidential. Interested participants should contact the researcher directly by texting the word “research” to [\[text line to be activated upon approval to begin research\]](#).

*Social media is not a secure means of communication. Please do not contact the researcher through social media.*

## Appendix D

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** Educators' Perspectives of Online Student Outcomes

**Principal Investigator:** Rikki J. Cook, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a public high school educator with a minimum of five years of experience teaching, including experience teaching both online and in face-to-face classroom environments. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

#### What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore how educators have experienced students' social and emotional development in relation to an online learning environment. This study aims to build upon an understanding of the environmental impacts regarding adolescent social-emotional development.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete the participant questionnaire and return to the researcher by email at your earliest convenience.
2. Participate in a one-to-one interview with the researcher, hosted online and video-recorded for the researcher's subsequent review. The interview is estimated to last approximately 60 minutes.
3. Review and provide comment regarding the verbatim transcript of your interview, as well as the researcher's identification of emerging themes from your interview.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include building an understanding of the educators' perspectives and experiences regarding students' social-emotional development. The information provided by this study will contribute to knowledge that may help educators, administrators and policy makers better understand the educational environment. Findings from this study may further validate the relationship between social-emotional development and academic performance in relation to environmental impacts such as those related to the educational setting.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

The researcher is a mandated reporter and is ethically bound to all mandatory reporting requirements regarding report of child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse or intent to harm self or others.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of assigned numeric participant codes. Interviews will be conducted virtually, with the researcher participating from a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected for this study will be stored as a secure digital file within a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored as a secure digital file within a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive account for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- The information you provide will be kept private. However, it is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to report any stated event of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation to the appropriate authority. While the researcher is not seeking this type of information in this study, it is necessary to express this limit as it pertains to your confidentiality.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Rikki J. Cook. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Nathan Borrett at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature



**Appendix E**  
**Participant Questionnaire**

Participant Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ [cell phone Y/N]

Email Address  
\_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Preferred method of communication  
from the researcher:

- Phone
- Text
- Email

Preferred days/times for participant interview:  
(approximately 60-minute virtual interview with researcher)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

School District (where employed): \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Employment in Public Education: [from] \_\_\_\_\_ [to] \_\_\_\_\_

Please list any other States/Districts you have been employed by in the past:

Please list the total number of months your district enforced an online learning environment:

Please specify the month and year that your district began using an online learning environment:

Please specify the month and year that your district returned to a face-to-face learning environment:

Please return this questionnaire to the researcher as soon as possible by emailing it to [REDACTED]. Once received, the researcher will contact you by your preferred method of contact to schedule the one-to-one interview.

## Appendix F

### Equipment

The PC used for this study is monitored and protected by Windows Security.

- Virtualization-based security protects the core parts of the device.
- Trusted platform modules (TPM) provide additional encryption on the device.
- The secure boot feature prevents malicious software from loading upon startup of the device.

The device meets the requirement for standard hardware security.

Device name	DESKTOP-JI9PI0R
Processor	Intel(R) Core(TM) i7-10510U CPU @ 1.80GHz 2.30 GHz
Installed RAM	16.0 GB (15.8 GB usable)
Device ID	740DE236-F08C-4DDA-B9AF-8CC5D7FD87D2
Product ID	00325-96702-40421-AAOEM
System type	64-bit operating system, x64-based processor
Pen and touch	Touch support with 10 touch points
Edition	Windows 10
Version	20H2
Installed on	3/29/2021
OS build	19042.1415
Experience	Windows Feature Experience Pack 120.2212.3920.0

## Appendix G

### Code Categories

#### Prevalent Themes and Codes

Prevalent Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Social deficits	Disengaged	Inability to make eye contact Inability to maintain conversation Inability to recognize social standards Lack of engagement Refusal to speak publicly Refusal to participate in social activities Refusal to respond
Emotional deficits	Inability to regulate emotion	Emotional outbursts Inappropriate emotional expression Attempts to isolate Reduced feelings of trust Reduced feelings of control Expressed sadness Expressed anger Expressed anxiousness
Character traits	Unmotivated	Lack of work ethic Lack of motivation Refusal to meet classroom expectations Refusal to follow specified rules No desire to learn Unmet age-appropriate standards
Personal Identity	Unstable sense of identity	Poor hygiene Dress code violations Difficulty fitting in Transitioning gender Transitioning sexuality Frequent drug use
Behavioral concerns	Increased impulsivity	Increased impulsivity Increased aggressive behavior Increased vandalism Increased sexual activity

Expectations of the educational environment

Poor attendance

Increased drug use  
 Increased anxiety  
 Poor attendance  
 Skipping classes  
 Arriving late  
 Incomplete classwork  
 Incomplete homework  
 Poor grades

Attempts to Repair

Teacher to student interaction in class  
 Teacher to student interaction outside of class  
 Group seating arrangements  
 Group-based communication tasks  
 SEL curriculum  
 Collaboration with other educators  
 Clearly defining boundaries/expectations

Barriers to appropriate social and emotional development

a. Cell phones  
 b. Social media  
 c. Technology  
 d. Reduced opportunity to socialize  
 e. Inconsistency of expectations  
 f. Removal of consequences

Potential Benefits of Online Learning Opportunity

g. Lack of safety  
 a. Taking ownership of their education  
 b. Expressing gratitude for time on campus  
 c. Discovering an aptitude for online learning  
 d. Practiced time management skills  
 e. Improved use of technology