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Experiences of school administrators and teachers: Challenges and promising practices during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Experiences of school administrators and teachers: Challenges and promising practices during
the COVID-19 pandemic

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Submitted to the Faculty of
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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in the Department of Educational Leadership

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Pages in Study 62

Candidate for Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This study examined the lived experiences of teachers and administrators as reflected in their responses regarding instructional materials, instructional delivery, social and emotional well-being of students, and access to critical school services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared their experiences about how the instructional materials and delivery modes were selected as well as the guidance and support given by school administrators. Major challenges and concerns along with promising practices related to student engagement, social and emotional well-being of students, and access to critical school services were identified.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. An unending gratitude to my husband, W. Terry Carter, and our children, Jade and John Mark, my parents, E.L. and Hellen Hyde, and my in-laws, John and Janice Carter. Inspiration comes from those we look up to, those who encourage when there seems no encouragement to give and those who celebrate our milestones.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The pandemic will go down in the annals of American history for the loss of millions of lives in the United States, the isolation of families, the effect on education, and the impact on economics (Goudeau et al., 2021). Moreover, the greatest impact may not be realized for several years as American schools struggle to recapture the growth made among school-age students prior to the pandemic and reset the status quo for young learners (Hamilton et al., 2020). When the pandemic struck, 1.6 billion children were taken out of schools worldwide (Karboul, 2020) with 56 million living in the United States (Leeb et al., 2020). At the time schools first closed, most educators felt that within a few months students would be back in school and teachers would be able to manage the lost learning (Karboul, 2020).

Steele et al. (2020) stated the shift from the traditional face-to-face learning to virtual learning has been strenuous for both teachers and students. Virtual learning highlighted the dearth of Internet connectivity and computers among students (Office of Civil Rights, 2021). Many school systems expected parents to step up to help their children with their learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021). Yet, Bansak and Starr (2021) claimed that while parents wanted their children to continue learning, the diversity in resources across the United States led to declines in learning. Further, Bansak and Starr (2021) claimed that less educated parents spent no less time helping children than better educated parents.

In general, according to Hoofman and Secord (2021), virtual learning has not met the needs of children requiring special learning services, those living in poverty, children who speak English as a second language, or those living in rural area. Kuhfeld et al. (2020) estimated the average student lost one-third of a year to a full year's worth of learning in reading and about three-quarters of a year to more than one year in math since schools closed in March 2020.

In addition to the learning gap, there is the loss of teachers as documented in the literature (James, 2021). Decker et al. (2020) noted that at least 1,299 active and retired K-12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19. Of those, 448 were active teachers. Further, students across the United States have experienced the loss of social and emotional stability that American schools provided (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). Dorn et al. (2020) stated the learning loss cannot be adequately measured because of the "limited access to remote learning, the quality of remote instruction, home support and the degree of engagement" (p. 2).

Statement of the Problem

The United States educational system was not prepared for an extended shutdown as that imposed by COVID-19 (Dorn et al., 2020). In December 2019, the first human case of coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China (Moore, 2021). The disease, called COVID-19, quickly spread globally, becoming the fifth documented pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic (Moore, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the 1918 Spanish flu (H1N1), 1957 Asian flu (H2N2), 1968 Hong Kong flu (H3N2), and 2009 Pandemic flu (H1N1) killed collectively 3,300,000 people (Liu et al., 2020). During late 2019 and early 2020, within four months over 100,000 cases of COVID-19 were documented world-wide (Moore, 2021).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced the first person to die of COVID-19 in the United States on February 20, 2020 (Sullivan, 2021). On March 13, 2020,

President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, and within a week, California's Governor Gavin Newsom ordered the residents of California to stay at home (Sullivan, 2021). During March and April 2020, 42 states and territories declared similar stay at-home restrictions (Sullivan, 2021). By the end of December 2020, both Moderna and Pfizer had vaccines on the market that showed a 95% efficacy rate against the virus (Sullivan, 2021). Nonetheless, by September 2021, more than 200 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 4.6 million deaths were reported (Moore, 2021). Variants of the original COVID-19 continued to develop through 2021 (Moore, 2021).

In efforts to address school closures resulting from COVID-19, schools implemented a variety of educational strategies including virtual teaching and learning, paper mailings, video conferencing, and emailing in an attempt to continue the education of young people during the stay-at-home orders (Black et al., 2020). Martin and Sorensen (2020) pointed out that the school closures affected the most vulnerable children by restricting access to meal programs, limiting access to school-based health programs and limiting students' access to behavioral health resources. At the same time, teachers were faced with creating new ways to motivate students and create lessons that could be easily transferred (Maurer, 2021). Maurer (2021) addressed significant problems with both federal and state governments who gave no guidelines as to how virtual learning would be administered or monitored during the pandemic. Teachers were not only forced to teach on a new platform but amid fears for their own health (Kaden, 2020). Numerous studies showed that although children were at a lower risk to be infected by the COVID-19 virus, school administrators and teachers were not (Coryton, 2021). School administrators and teachers were plagued with "behavioral, psychological or physical symptoms, including panic attacks, anxiety, depression, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, mood swings,

forgetfulness, overeating and tearfulness” (Anonymous, 2021, p. 8). School administrators and teachers were faced with adapting and determining instructional materials and instructional delivery modes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The abrupt shifts and changes to virtual learning during the pandemic affected students, negatively impacting their social, emotional, and mental well-being and academic achievement (United States Department of Education, 2022). According to the United States Department of Education (2022), data collected before and during the COVID-19 pandemic showed in general that in-person learning leads to better academic outcomes, greater levels of student engagement, higher rates of attendance, and better social and emotional well-being, and ensures access to critical school services and extracurricular activities when compared to virtual learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of teachers and administrators as reflected in their responses regarding instructional materials, instructional delivery, social and emotional well-being of students, and access to critical school services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared their experiences about how the instructional materials and delivery modes were selected as well as the guidance and support given by school administrators. In addition, the researcher sought to determine major challenges and concerns as well as promising practices related to student engagement, social and emotional well-being of students, and access to critical school services.

Research Questions

The following was the overarching research question that guided the study. What are the challenges and promising practices of effective instructional materials, instructional delivery

modes, positive social and emotional well-being of students, and students' access for critical services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following are secondary research questions used to address the overarching research question. The secondary research questions were used during semi-structured interviews to collect the data for the study.

1. Effective Instructional Materials

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?
- B. What are promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?

2. Effective Instructional Delivery Modes

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic?
- B. What are promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional modalities during the pandemic?

3. Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic?
- B. What are promising practices for promoting positive social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic?

4. Access to Critical School Services

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their access to critical school services during the pandemic?
- B. What are promising practices for promoting and providing students access to critical school services during the pandemic?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided for clarity. The terms are used throughout the study.

Blended learning is a type of learning that combines both virtual and traditional forms of teaching. Content is digitalized and made available online. Students may use it to supplement, enhance or remediate traditional learning (Racheva, 2017).

COVID-19 school closure refers to the period of time from mid-March 2020 until the present (Baker, 2020).

Critical services for students include a combination of services including physical education, health education, nutrition services, and social, emotional and mental health services (Mississippi Department of Health, 2022).

Distance Learning refers to learning away from the classroom by using computers and telecommunication facilities (Jevsikova et al., 2021). Distance learning can also include provision of hard-copy materials such as worksheets or packets of lessons (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Instructional delivery modes have changed from the traditional lecture to an online service (Fyle et al., 2012). Fyle et al. (2012) define instructional delivery modes as means of teaching that include assessment, feedback, and remediation.

Instructional materials traditionally were print-based worksheets or textbooks. According to Donkor (2010), as the instructional delivery changes from face-to-face to distance learning, instructional materials are changing to workshops and laboratories that provide hands-on-activities, print-based illustrations of step-by-step procedures, and video-based practical lessons.

Run-off packets are small bundles of printed educational papers given to students to complete during a designated time (Wall, 2020).

Social and emotional stressors refer to changes in one's environment such as the fear of disease, loss of family members, and the lack of school support (socialization, meals, school health) (Hoofman & Secord, 2021).

Social and emotional well-being is a person's ability to understand and manage their emotions, make responsible decisions, build and maintain relationships, and understand and empathize with others (Champion, 2022).

Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT) is an online marketplace where teachers buy or sell teacher-created educational materials. According to Teachers Pay Teachers, more than 7 million educators use TPT for resources (TPT, 2023).

Traditional classrooms may be defined as 2-way interaction between teachers and students in the same location (Hassan et al., 2014).

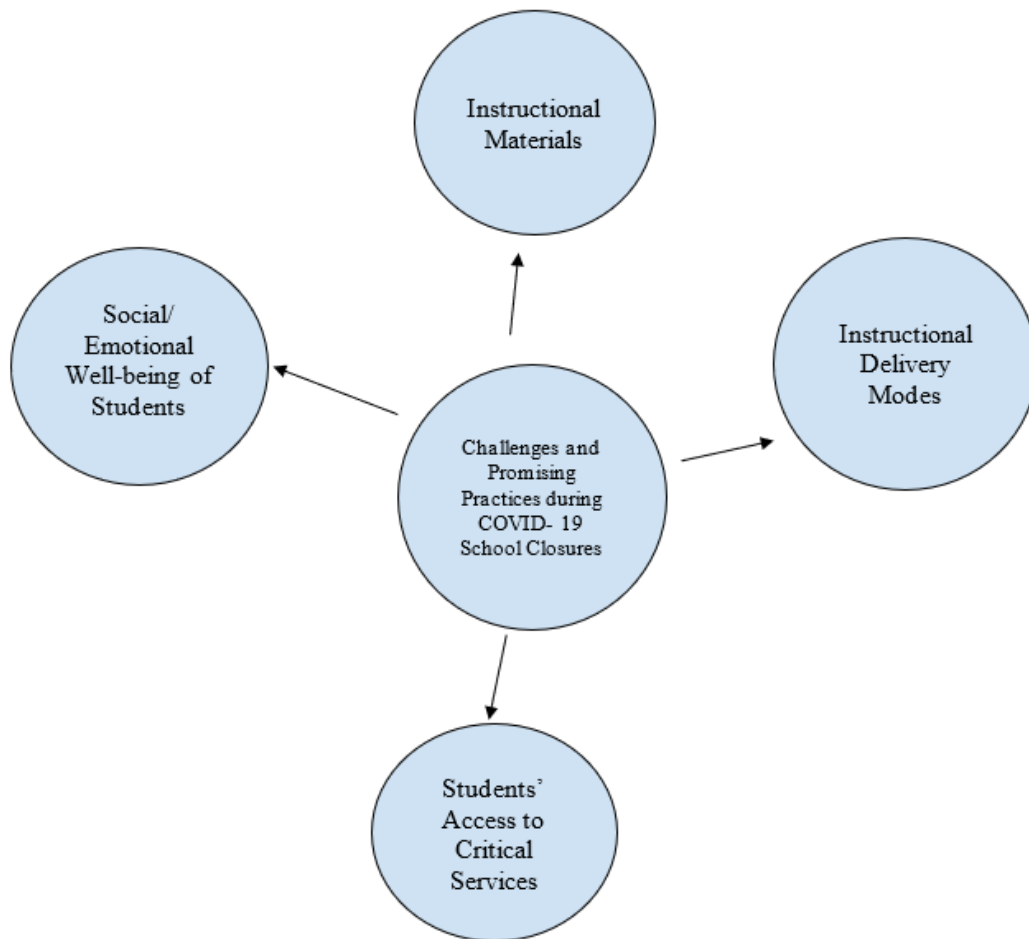
Virtual learning is a learning experience utilizing computers and/or the Internet. Teaching activities occur online and the teacher and student are physically separated (Racheva, 2017). Virtual learning may also be known as E-learning, web-based learning or online learning (Racheva, 2017).

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 represents an illustration of the conceptual framework of the study. The study includes views from school administrators and teachers about their experiences related to challenges and best practices of instructional materials and modes of instructional delivery during COVID-19 school closures. School administrators and teachers shared their experiences focused on challenges and best promising practices addressing students' social and emotional well-being and students' access to critical needs. The intent of the study was to present emergent themes relating to challenges and promising approaches and practices that may improve the existing educational system in the case of another major disruption in the educational setting.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Theoretical Framework of the Study

The Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model was selected to help explain the theoretical aspects of the study. According to Pappas (2017), this model of instructional design seeks the development of eLearning by looking at the needs, learning objectives and outcomes to create a better eLearning resource and delivery of the materials. The five phases of the model - analysis, design, development, implementation, and

evaluation - represent a dynamic, flexible guideline for building effective training and performance support tools which may be used by school administrators and teachers.

Delimitations of the Study

The study included participants from two local school districts in the state of Mississippi. Six teachers and four administrators from high-performing school districts were selected to participate in the study. To be considered high performing, each district selected was labeled by the Mississippi Department of Education as either an A or B school district prior to the pandemic. All participants met the criterion of employment during the pandemic.

Significance of the Study

The study was significant in that teachers and administrators shared their experiences related to instructional materials, instructional delivery, students' social and emotional well-being, and students' access to critical services during the pandemic. The results from the study included major challenges and promising practices as seen through the lens of teachers and administrators.

Organization of the Dissertation

The study includes five chapters. Chapter one introduces the topic and discusses the significance of the topic. Following the review of existing literature in chapter two, chapter three discusses the qualitative methodology used. Chapter four presents the findings of this study and chapter five includes a summary of the findings and offers suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Review of the Related Literature

To review and summarize current literature related to the effects of school closure due to COVID-19 was the purpose of this chapter. The chapter begins with historical perspectives of school closures followed by analysis of the existing literature related to instructional materials and instructional delivery during virtual teaching and learning. The emotional and social impact of school closings on students and access to their critical needs are presented.

Historical Review of School Closures

Schools in the United States have always closed for severe weather and occasionally for a few days in severe flu seasons; however, most of the data about school closings come after a natural disaster such as a tornado, earthquake, or hurricane (Martinez & Broemmel, 2021). Francom et al. (2021) noted that these types of school closings are localized in nature and do not necessarily require distance learning.

COVID-19 set records for the number of students missing school. According to Decker et al. (2020), 48 states, four United States territories, and the District of Columbia were ordered or recommended school building closures during the spring of the 2019-2020 school year by the United States Department of Education, affecting 50.8 million public school students. Until this time, school superintendents and local school boards were the decisionmakers who decided what would warrant closing schools, usually impending weather or illness (Goodman, 2015).

Hamilton and Ercikan (2022) noted that most American schools rely on local control, which often shows discrepancies based on the wealth of the school district. Garcia and Weiss (2020) agreed that direct comparisons of school districts cannot be made; however, guidance on topics such as loss of learning and use of different learning modes can be derived.

Garcia and Weiss (2020) suggested that the American educational system was not designed to cope with extended closure. Schools lacked the structure to sustain effective teaching and learning during the pandemic and to support the needs of the students (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). Kuhfeld et al. (2020) pointed out that students and teachers had little experience with remote learning. Kuhfeld et al. (2020) considered data derived from severe weather closures, summer vacations, and absenteeism due to the lack of a parallel situation. Most scholars agree that the true outcome of the closure from the COVID-19 pandemic will not be known for several years (Dorn et al., 2020).

Learning Loss During School Closures

Marcotte and Hansen (2022) asserted that American students spend less time in school than do students in other industrialized countries. The researchers insisted that longer time in school would increase student achievement (Marcotte & Hansen, 2022). However, Marcotte and Hansen (2022) pointed out that little research has been done on the comparison of loss of school days and student achievement, and that most schools in the United States follow a similar pattern in the length of the school year. Goodman (2015) suggested that discussions of instructional time do not usually focus on the loss by individual student attendance. Goodman (2015) also claimed that the average student in the United States misses more than two weeks of school every year due to weather, illness, or parental disengagement from school.

Using data from Maryland's 2008 school closures for weather, Hemelt (2008) estimated that the percentage of students passing math assessments falls by about one-third to one-half a percentage point for each day school is closed. A study by McKinsey & Company (2021) showed students in fall of 2021, "learned only 67% of the math and 87% of the reading that grade-level peers would typically have learned" (Dorn et al., 2020, p. 2). Dorn (2020) also pointed out that the discrepancy is higher in students of color. Garcia and Weiss (2020) stated that normally students increase academic performance between 0.3 - 0.7 standard deviations per year based on age and subject.

Renaissance (2021) reported discrepancies in academic performance continuing into the 2020-2021 school year. Based on 3.3 million students who completed Renaissance Star Assessments during the pandemic 2020-2021 school year, students grew more slowly in both math and language arts than would be expected in typical years (Renaissance, 2021). Students scored on average 8 points below expected pre-pandemic performance in language arts and 16 points below in math (Renaissance, 2021). Goudeau et al. (2021) agreed with Renaissance and added the performance gap was greater in low-income urban areas.

Middleton et al. (2020) reported that the lack of standardization of online teaching can and will pose problems for students when they return to class. Middleton et al. (2020) predicted that learning loss gaps will widen especially if schools cannot review missed materials and teach new materials in the same year.

Kwakye and Crocker (2021) stated the impact on learning cannot be accurately given because of challenges with student assessments. Kwakye and Crocker (2021) reported that students are spending less time on learning activities than before the pandemic began. In addition, these students receive less live contact with teachers.

Dorn et al. (2020) stated, "although students at the best full-time virtual schools can do as well as or better than those at traditional ones, most studies have found that full-time online learning does not deliver the academic results of in-class instruction" (p. 3). Dorn et al. (2020) also believe besides a large learning loss, COVID-19 school closures will increase the dropout rate of high school students to an estimated 232,000 to 1.1million students.

While the majority of schools did offer some form of virtual or distance learning during the pandemic, the assessment of the work varied greatly (Hamilton et al., 2020). According to Hamilton et al. (2020), 80% of teachers required students to complete work, with the amount of feedback and grading being varied. In high-poverty areas, work was basically review oriented (Hamilton et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, 82% of teachers stated their students were not able to keep up academically (Digital Promise, 2021). Teachers blamed part of this on the fact that teachers were not able to work with students' individual learning needs (Digital Promise, 2021). The report showed 65% of teachers indicated their ability to address individual student's needs got worse since the pandemic began.

McMorris-Santoro (2021) suggested the pandemic has made it easier for students to fall behind. Students who were a little behind became further behind until they stopped going or trying at all (McMorris-Santoro, 2021). According to McMorris-Santoro (2021), data on dropout rates from across the United States showed decline in attendance, more failing students, and lower enrollments.

Students' Social and Emotional Well-being

The Office of Civil Rights (2021) reported between 37,300 and 43,000 children have been impacted by COVID-19 via the death of a close family member. Williams et al. (2020)

suggested such deaths increase "traumatic grief, depression, and poor educational outcomes" (p.110). Kuhfeld et al. (2020) also pointed out that both children and parents are under additional stress as they fear catching a life-threatening virus, loss of jobs, and disruptions to normal routines. Hoofman and Secord (2021) maintained families and students depend on schools for shelter, food, health care, and social well-being. Hoofman and Secord (2021) suggested that the economic instability of COVID-19 has increased depression and anxiety in students. Gazmararian et al. (2021) added that vulnerable populations, such as racial and ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic groups, are impacted more, affecting adolescents' mental health. Kaden (2020) found that students who were missing included transient students, homeless students, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty.

Access to critical students' needs were limited during the pandemic (United States Department of Education, 2022). Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) reported that 13% of public-school students require an individual education plan (IEP). Of these students, 80% require school-based services including specialized educators and structured learning environments (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). School nutrition programs serve 35 million children living in poverty as food was especially a critical issue during the pandemic and remains a critical issue (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). With school closures and distance learning, many of the students' needs were not met (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Tabish (2020) asserted that 310 million children who are dependent on school meals are now not getting their daily nutrition.

Changes in children's normal routines at school to distance learning have created other problems. Children did not engage in exercising as much during the pandemic as they did while in school (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). Hoofman and Secord (2021) found students' sitting time had increased from 5 to 8 hours a day. Martin and Sorensen (2020) found school closures limited

students' access to behavioral health resources, causing social isolation, frustration and boredom, weight gain, and disrupted sleep cycles. The researchers found children who are quarantined or isolated also have higher depressive symptoms (Martin & Sorensen, 2020). After analyzing data from a national survey, the authors of Digital Promise (2021) emphasized that 88% of teachers surveyed stated missing social interactions at school or with friends was a major problem for their students. Findings from the survey also suggested that students missed the personal connection with their teachers (Digital Promise, 2021). Parents cited keeping up academically and staying busy during the day as major problems for their children (Digital Promise, 2021).

Virtual Teaching and Learning

Virtual learning is a learning experience utilizing computers and/or the Internet. Teaching activities occur online and the teacher and students are physically separated (Racheva, 2017). Virtual learning may also be known as E-learning, web-based learning or online learning (Racheva, 2017). However, Rashid et al. (2021) determined that a computer system cannot improve academic performance if it is not utilized properly. Teachers, students, and parents must be actively involved for virtual learning to succeed (Rashid et al., 2021). Unfortunately, Trust and Whalen (2021) claimed that while educators increased their usage of digital media, the educators still used traditional classroom communication, information delivery and management practices. Hassan et al. (2014) stated that the alternative methods of presenting lessons cannot compete with the benefits of attending classes, but students were given an opportunity to learn at their own pace while at home.

The pandemic not only closed many schools, but it also forced schools to digitize lessons (Goudeau et al., 2021). Although web-based distance learning has grown rapidly within post-secondary education, resources including instructional materials among secondary school

districts vary greatly (Office of Civil Rights, 2021). The Office of Civil Rights (2021) posited that many of the resources are related to economics of the family and school districts, such as the availability of Internet and computers as well as the expectation for academic achievement.

Hamilton and Ercikan (2022) found fewer than half of school principals reported having a pre-pandemic plan to deal with extended school closings, and many lacked supports for remote learning. Goudeau et al. (2021) pointed out that social class was in direct relationship to a family's access to digital tools, familiarity with digital skills, and usage of digital tools. Huck and Zhang (2021) found that nearly 90% of principals reported that students lacked Internet access and 40% of their teachers lacked Internet access. Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) found one in seven children lacked home Internet access and the rate doubled among low income communities. Martinez and Broemmel (2021) added that some school districts did not require any type of online instruction during the pandemic since the schools could not ensure equitable access for all their students.

Black et al. (2020) were quick to state that virtual schooling is not suited for all students or all families. In order to be successful in virtual schooling, students must be motivated, organized and supported (Black et al., 2020). Francom et al. (2021) advanced that teachers need clear guidelines on how much teaching and learning should occur, more training on online learning practices, and a better understanding of potential online learning technologies. Francom et al. (2021) stated that many teachers were self-taught through YouTube tutorials, independent google searches, and help from other teachers during the pandemic.

In most instances, the abrupt jump to distance learning required the school administrator to choose the educational technology being used in the school (Digital Promise, 2021). Scholars

at Digital Promise (2021) found that half of public-school teachers had no say in which software was chosen by their respective district.

Challenges Facing Teachers and School Administrators

As schools closed during the pandemic, teachers scrambled to adapt subject content to online platforms, and parents struggled with work responsibilities and the need to educate their children (Soland et al., 2020). Although teachers were familiar with the use of computers in their classrooms, Kaden (2020) pointed out that teachers faced "the single most traumatic and transformative event of the modern era" (p.165). Kaden (2020) found that teachers want to teach all their children, but an inadequate number of digital devices for students and lack of high-speed Internet in homes decreased the number of students reached. According to Kaden (2020), teacher education programs require new teachers to use multimedia tools and digital resources in their teaching, but not to deliver lessons completely through virtual media. Middleton (2020) asserted that teachers have consistently complained they were not prepared to teach online and that many of their students did not login to complete assignments. Trust and Whalen (2021) argued that the use of technology did not solve the problem but created a rush to buy computers without supporting quality education.

Trust and Whalen (2021) reported teachers found learning how to find, evaluate, and use new digital tools and applications as their greatest challenge. Trust and Whalen (2021) also stated that teachers had problems both motivating and disciplining students in online venues. Survey results from Digital Promise (2021) showed teachers' overall satisfaction with their jobs went from 34% in 2019 to 23% in 2021.

Will et al. (2020) reported that teachers are leaving the field of education because of COVID-19 fears. Prior research showed about 18% of all public-school teachers are age 55 or

older, putting them at a greater risk of COVID-19 (Will et al., 2020). Studies by the Kaiser Foundation estimated that one in four has health issues that increase risks. Diliberti et al. (2021) claimed the addition of more stress added to an already stressful profession caused teachers to quit. Diliberti et al. (2021) reported from a nationally sampling of teachers that one-fourth of those questioned said they were likely to leave the teaching profession before the end of the 2020-21 school term. These same teachers stated they were not planning on leaving the profession prior to the pandemic (Diliberti et al., 2021). The loss of teachers affects student achievement (Diliberti et al., 2021). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported there are 567,000 fewer teachers in America's public schools than before the pandemic (Edelman, 2022). James (2021) identified 3,036 certified teacher vacancies in the state of Mississippi at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. In addition to teacher vacancies, James (2021) noted 1,467 vacancies among administrators, teachers' assistants, bus drivers and food service staff.

The Role of the Administrator

Decker (2020) echoed problems that administrators across the United States are facing such as teacher shortages. Maurer (2021) explained that districts are not only missing teachers, but school bus drivers, maintenance workers, and cafeteria workers causing some districts to remain in virtual learning. Recent studies indicated one in four district administrators were reporting severe staffing shortages (Maurer, 2021).

Findings showed that when schools closed spring of 2020, there was a tremendous disruption in the hiring process which usually takes place in the spring as new candidates graduate college. Kimbrel (2021) looked at the problems that virtual interviews created. Normally, hiring is often directly related to a candidate's first impression, his/her enthusiasm level, and facial expressions (Kimbrel, 2021). In virtual interviews, administrators relied more

on digital portfolios and situational interview questions to determine qualifications (Kimbrel, 2021). Kimbrel (2021) added that administrators were able to interview more candidates in less time, expand the geographical area of their search, and provide a more authentic assessments of the candidates.

Many schools also face the shortage of equipment and digital programs to assist teachers in the creation and transmission of distance learning (Fine, 2016). Fine (2016) stated that administrators are overwhelmed by the number of calls they receive from companies. Top priority for administrators, according to Fine (2020), is evaluation of existing instructional materials. Fine (2020) insisted that teachers should have input into which programs are used.

Chapter Summary

Although the true effects of COVID-19 will not be shown for several years, the literature suggested a greater learning gap than that found in regular school years. The literature indicated various ways that COVID-19 affected students, teachers and administrators. The lack of internet and computer resources also hampered the education of students, especially those in the poverty levels.

The literature also pointed to teachers wanting to have voice in choosing new programs. Challenges facing teachers and administrators include selecting instructional materials, determining modes of instructional delivery, the social and emotional well-being of students, and access to resources for addressing students' critical needs.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The purpose of this chapter was to present the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures employed in this study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the selected research design, research questions, description of the case, selection of participants, and role of the researcher. The chapter concludes with a description of the proposed data collection, data analysis, validation of findings, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study was a qualitative case study. Merriam (1998) describes a qualitative case study as a “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 21). According to Ary (1972), qualitative researchers may use written documents or other artifacts to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study. Additionally, Ary (1972) explained that documents may be autobiographies, diaries, letters, files, reports, memoranda, or minutes; or documents of popular culture, such as books, films, and videos.

Merriam (1998) stated that qualitative case studies can be described as focusing on a particular situation, event, or phenomenon. In this situation (COVID-19 school closures), the case study is important for what it revealed about how schools related to the event. Merriam (1998) claims a case study can suggest what to do or not do in a similar situation, have the advantage of hindsight, obtain material from a wide variety of sources, and explain why an

innovation worked or failed to work. Merriam (1998) concludes that a qualitative case study can reveal knowledge that otherwise would be unknown.

Research Questions

The following was the overarching research question that guided the study. What are the challenges and promising practices using effective instructional materials, instructional delivery modes, positive social and emotional well-being of students, and students' access for critical school services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following are secondary research questions used to address the overarching research question. The secondary research questions were used during semi-structured interviews to collect the data for the study.

1. Effective Instructional Materials

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?
- B. What were promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?

2. Effective Instructional Delivery Modes

- A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic?
- B. What are promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional modalities during the pandemic?

3. Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic?

B. What are promising practices for promoting positive social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic?

4. Access to Critical School Services

A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their access to critical school services during the pandemic?

B. What are promising practices for promoting and providing students access to critical school services during the pandemic?

Internal Review Board

The researcher submitted the Internal Review Board (IRB) application for approval to conduct the study following approval of the dissertation proposal by the Dissertation Committee. The researcher began the collection of data after the application was approved.

Participants

Participants for this study were six teachers and four administrators from five schools within two school districts of central Mississippi. Both districts were similar in size and rural location. In addition, the participants had first-hand experiences with integrating distance learning, establishing protocol for online teaching, relating to students, and facing their own fears of COVID-19. All participants came from high-performing school districts that were labeled by the Mississippi Department of Education as either an A- or B-rated school district prior to the pandemic. The participants were selected from high-performing schools to cover effective

routines and practices typically aligned with high academic achievement. All participants were working during the pandemic. All participants worked with middle school students ranging in 5th-8th Grades. This study looked for characteristics associated with effective instructional materials and the delivery of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic while schools were closed.

Role of Researcher

Merriam (1998) described the researcher as “the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data” (p. 20). The researcher must be cognizant of personal biases and minimize the influences one’s biases may have on the study (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2014) suggested that the researcher must have the skills needed to ask the appropriate questions, to “listen” to the answers, and to adapt to new situations with a positive attitude. Further, the researcher must understand the issues related to the problem being researched and must have the ability to interpret the information at the time of data collection without using the case study to “substantiate a preconceived position” (p. 61). In the case of this study, the researcher holds a valid teachers’ license and has worked in schools during the pandemic. Furthermore, the researcher has rapport with teachers and school administrators across the state and possesses the necessary skills to ask questions, listen to their responses, and adapt to adverse situations. However, no bias existed.

Data Collection

The data collection for the study was based on Yin’s (2014) three principles for collecting case study data: (a) use multiple sources of evidence, (b) create a case study database, and (c) maintain a chain of evidence. Yin discussed six sources of evidence: documentation, archival

records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. The primary source of data collection for the study consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings using the secondary research questions. Interviews were scheduled after the participants were selected. The interviews and Zoom meetings were led by the researcher and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Focus group meetings were then scheduled and held via Zoom by the researcher and lasted 30-45 minutes. Participants received a copy of the definitions and questions to be addressed in this study prior to the interviews. All sessions were recorded and transcribed for data analysis by the researcher. All data collected for the study were organized, coded, analyzed, and evaluated according to emerging themes.

Validation of Findings

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings from the study, Creswell (2007) suggested the researcher use strategies including: “(a) triangulation, (b) rich, thick descriptions, (c) clarify bias, (d) present negative or discrepant information, (e) spend prolonged time in the field, and (f) peer debriefing” (p. 196). Triangulation included synthesizing multiple forms of data to arrive at emerging themes (Merriam, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

To comply with ethical considerations in conducting research, all participants provided written consent to be interviewed and to participate in the research. The participants, therefore, were willingly participants in the study.

Analysis of the Data

The data for the study were organized, analyzed, and summarized utilizing NVivo software. The researcher grouped the collected data using the four components (instructional

materials, instructional delivery modes, students' social and emotional well-being, and students' access to critical resources). A rich, thick descriptive analysis allows the reader to obtain a detailed description of the case (Merriam, 1998). The descriptive analysis allows readers to transfer the research findings to future situations (Merriam, 1998). Throughout the analysis of the data, the researcher attempted to maintain the focus of the study on the participants' experiences as related to the challenges and promising practices during the pandemic.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the research procedures used in the study. The research study used a qualitative, descriptive single case study design. The chapter provides an overview of qualitative, single case study research, a description of the case, a listing of the research questions, a description of the participants, and the role of the researcher. The data collection section covers a description of the principles for collecting case study data, sources of evidence, and data collection components used in the study. The section on data analysis includes a description of the steps utilized for data analysis, validation of findings, and ethical considerations. The data analysis generated emergent themes.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter was to summarize and report the findings from this study of school administrators and teachers. The study was designed to examine the reflective experiences of school administrators and teachers related to the closure of school due to COVID-19. First, the researcher inquired about training and professional development school teachers had received in preparation for school closures. Second, school administrators had the opportunity to share their reflective experiences related to the selection of available materials and technology. Third, the intent of the study was to identify best practices regarding protocol and procedures related to methods for reaching the most students in a manner that continued the education of the student with the same fidelity as in the classroom. Finally, school administrators and teachers were asked to give recommendations for improvements and policy changes in the event that schools have an extended closure.

The central overarching question that guided this research study was as follows: What are the challenges and promising practices of effective instructional materials, instructional delivery modes, positive social and emotional well-being of students, and students' access for critical services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In addition to the overarching research question, secondary research questions were used to help guide the study. The following are secondary research questions used to address the overarching research question while collecting data for this study.

1. Effective Instructional Materials
 - A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?
 - B. What were promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?
2. Effective Instructional Delivery Modes
 - A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic?
 - B. What are promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional modalities during the pandemic?
3. Social and Emotional Well-being of Students
 - A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic?
 - B. What are promising practices for promoting positive social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic?
4. Access to Critical School Services
 - A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their access to critical school services during the pandemic?
 - B. What are promising practices for promoting and providing students access to critical school services during the pandemic?

Case Study Analysis of School Administrators and Teachers

The analysis of the data was completed using questionnaire responses, summary notes, and artifacts collected during the study.

Demographics of the Participants in the Study

Four building-level administrators and six school teachers from five public schools with an A- or B-rated school located in Central Mississippi were selected and participated in the study. Demographic information of the participants during the 2020-2021 school year (age ranges, gender, race, education level, and years of experience) are included in the findings. All participants were active in the school system when COVID-19 forced the first school closings.

Table 1 provides a display of the age ranges of the participants. Frequencies and percentages are provided.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of School Teachers (N=6) and School Administrators (N=4) by Age Ranges

<i>Age Range</i>	<i>School Teachers</i>		<i>School Administrators</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
21 to 25	1	17		
26 to 35	2	33		
36 to 50	1	17	3	75
Over 50	2	33	1	25
Total	6	100	4	100

Table 1 shows the majority of the school teachers were below the 50 years age range (67%, $n=4$). Table 1 also shows that 75% ($n=3$) of the school administrators were 50 and below

years of age. Only 25% ($n=1$) of the administrators were in the over 50 age group. Table 1 shows none of the school administrators were under 35 years of age.

Table 2 provides a display of the race and gender of the school teachers and administrators. Frequencies and percentages of the participants are provided.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of School Teachers (N=6) and Administrator Participants (N=4) by Race and Gender

<i>Race and Gender</i>	<i>School Teachers</i>		<i>School Administrators</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
African American Female	1	16.6	0	0
African American Male	1	16.6	1	25
Caucasian Female	3	50	1	25
Caucasian Male	1	16.6	2	50
Total	6	100	4	100

The majority of the school teachers participating were females (66.6%, $n=4$). Of the four females, one (25%) was African American and three (75%) were Caucasian. There were two (33%) male teachers. Of the male teachers, one was African American (50%, $n=1$) and one was Caucasian (50%, $n=1$). Two of the school administrators (50%, $n=2$) were Caucasian males, one was a Caucasian female (25%, $n=1$) and one administrator (25%, $n=1$) was African American male.

Participants had an opportunity to indicate their educational attainment on the demographic survey. Table 3 provides a display of educational credentials of the school teachers and administrators. Frequencies and percentages are provided for each educational level.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of the Educational Credentials of School Teachers (N=6) and Administrator Participants (N=4)

<i>Educational Credentials</i>	<i>School Teachers</i>		<i>School Administrators</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Bachelor's Degree	2	33		
Master's Degree	4	67	2	50
Higher than Master's Degree	0	0	2	50
Total	6	100	4	100

Table 3 shows the majority of the teachers held master's degrees (67%, $n=4$). The other two school teachers (33%) held bachelor's degree. The administrators all held advanced college degrees with 50% ($n=2$) holding master's degrees and 50% ($n=2$) holding degrees higher than a master's degree.

Summary of Demographics

There were 10 participants in this study. Of the 10 participants, 6 were school teachers and 4 were building-level administrators. All participants were employed with two school districts and worked with middle school students in Grades 5-8. The participants ranged in age from 21 – 50+ years of age, and the majority (70%, $n=7$) were Caucasians. There were three

participants (30%) who identified themselves as African Americans. The participants were 50% male ($n=5$) and 50% female ($n=5$). All 10 participants held at least a bachelor's degree and 80% ($n=8$) held a master's degree or higher.

Secondary Research Questions A

This section of the research findings includes a narrative on effective instructional materials and delivery modes. Teachers and administrators were asked the following questions concerning effective instructional materials and delivery modes.

Effective Instructional Materials

1. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?

Teachers were quick to note that education went into a maintenance mode during COVID-19. One teacher stated her goal was to keep students from dropping from their most current level of assessed performance. Another added, "We were not prepared!" Although all six teachers mentioned following the MDE standards, none of the six had an answer for the best way to do this.

All four of the administrators agree that the best method of instruction is face-to-face classroom teaching, but this was not an option. Therefore, all four administrators went to the next option: online classes with Google Classroom. One administrator was quick to point to the biggest challenge for his students at the closing and that was lack of WiFi and computers. He stated, "For my school, the paper-pencil instruction became the best form of teaching due to the lack of internet access and/or computers for students." The other three administrators agreed that internet access was a major problem. "Our district did set up hotspots in the city area but so

many of our students were rural and lacked the means to travel to these hotspots,” stated another administrator.

One administrator voiced several concerns about the run-off packets of activities that teachers were creating for those students who did not have Internet access. Although he stated the packets were usually picked up, many were never returned. “My teachers have questioned giving grades for work that may or may not have been done by the student,” he added.

Other than the lack of WiFi, other challenges were brought out. Students, teachers, and administrators had a realistic fear of COVID-19. One teacher describes her students as “living in multigenerational homes where the elderly family members are dying”. She added, “My students are afraid to come to school. They are scared they will be the one who carries the virus into their homes and gives it to their elderly relatives.” Another teacher pointed out, “My students want to be in school, but don’t feel safe coming to school.” As one administrator commented, “Add lack of technology and a fear of COVID-19 to the desire to keep learning, and we created physically and emotionally drained teachers and students.” Another administrator added, “We will have a group of students and teachers who have to learn to be in social settings again.”

Teachers pointed to another challenge: materials that meet the standard yet are adaptable to meet the needs of both the students and teachers. “Adapting materials to a digital format was a challenge,” adds another teacher. “I am learning Google Classroom and am trying to adapt, but it is hard to do at home.” Another teacher pointed to the abundance of material that have appeared suddenly on Teacher Pay Teacher (TPT). “TPT has bombarded the internet with digital materials but they are not at the rigor of my class.” A third teacher committed that she did not have internet at home and had to either go to a hotspot such as McDonald’s or to school to work on her classwork.

2. What were promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional materials during the pandemic?

All six teachers mentioned the use of Mississippi Department of Education’s standards and scaffolding documents. All six teachers had pacing guides for the year established prior to the closure. When schools closed, the situation changed. “Initially, I went with what we had already in place and tried to put it in digital format,” says one teacher. She adds that websites began offering so much material that she began using it. Another teacher says, “I used whatever I could find.” Another insists that “it was the best we could do considering we were so unprepared for the situation.” When asked about the teacher’s contribution to the selection process for effective instructional materials during the pandemic, one teacher laughed and said, “We didn’t have time to be selective and go through the normal process of selecting effective materials because the ship had set sail and we were trying to stay afloat.” One of the administrators agreed with this teacher. “When students went home for Spring Break in mid-March of 2020, we had no idea that we would not return to our normal schedule. As the pandemic numbers grew, we had no option but to close school. If we had been given time to group meet with all our teachers and plan together, I think we could have done a better job.”

Effective Instructional Delivery Modes

1. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic?

According to the four administrators, technology was the major challenge relating to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic. The lack of reliable internet connections added with the lack of one-to-one computers for students and teachers hindered effective online instruction. One administrator was quick to point to the lack of

technology available for students and teachers. “Even if I had a computer to loan them, the majority of our students did not have internet connections to facilitate the programs.” Another administrator agreed and explained that teachers were in the same situation as the students. “My teachers took their laptops home with them but many could not send lessons from home due to a lack of internet. “Our district,” stated the third administrator, “set up ‘hot spots’ where students could go to connect to the internet, but the students often mingled and worked together which did nothing to help social distancing which was our concern when we closed school.” The fourth administrator commented, “Our school community is rural and internet capability for the majority was just not available.” All four administrators felt technology was the most challenging problem during the pandemic. An administrator added, “Had everyone had Internet availability, we could have continued the education process with less problems.”

A teacher points to the challenge of making her online lessons motivating enough for students to complete the work. “My kids are used to dynamic games and involvement in games. My lessons could not compete.” “My problem was with the parents,” stated another teacher. “I could see the parent typing in the answers which defeated the whole purpose.” One teacher, who used paper handouts, was quick to add, “I know my students are missing out on lots of activities.” Another teacher stated she called her students weekly so that they could at least hear her voice. She added, “A phone call and a folder of handouts, however, cannot replace the lesson we would have had in my classroom.”

All six teachers did say that the administration set the basics for what delivery mode they were to use; although one teacher said, “My administrator was very supportive and allowed us to try different things.” All six used Google Classroom in a limited format. As a teacher described it, “I put lessons on Google Classroom for those who had computers and internet; I sent home

packets of handouts to the other students who had an adult who would come by the school and pick up the packets. Unfortunately, some got nothing.” Handouts became a problem for teachers who had to make copies, assemble packets, and label for each student. These packets were then placed in the entrance of the school by the teacher’s names. Parents were supposed to pick up packets and return packets. “I never got a packet returned until the students returned to school almost five months later,” added one frustrated teacher.

2. What are promising practices for selecting and using effective instructional modalities during the pandemic?

“Before the pandemic, criteria were set in place to select and use instructional modalities to meet the objectives set for our students; however, during the pandemic, the wellbeing of our teachers and students became our most important objective,” began an administrator. The other three administrators confirmed the same for their schools. “We opened the school for teachers,” added another administrator, “so they could work in isolation on lessons which gave us an opportunity to give out materials on how to use Google Classroom.” One administrator commented, “Teachers were given the opportunity to access their classrooms to work on lessons but guidelines were addressed to practice social distancing and not congregate in each other’s classroom.” One of the teachers added, “We would call our colleagues and discuss what we would send out. We considered this our way to have any similarities in materials for the same grade.”

One of the teachers discussed Google Classroom also, “My district named certain people on our staff to assist with Google Classroom. I could call and ask them questions.” Another teacher commended TPT. “I used a lot of purchases from TPT during the pandemic. They were already in digital format.” However, this same teacher was quick to point out that she did not use

many of those activities any more. “I found that TPT activities were often less rigorous than the assignments I normally used in my classroom.” A third teacher stated, “I watched a lot of YouTube videos to teach myself how to do things with my online instruction.”

Teachers and administrators became better acquainted with technology to select more effective instructional materials. Teachers discovered ways to connect electronically with their students to make instruction more effective. Both of which added to the practice of more motivated, direct teaching which identified with the students.

Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

1. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their social and emotions well-being during the pandemic?

Fear was the number one challenge that students faced according to the administrators and teachers. “Many of my students lost loved ones during the pandemic; they were afraid to get close to anyone,” stated one teacher. Another teacher mentioned that this was especially true in multi-generational homes. Administrators pointed out that the fear of catching COVID-19 was an issue among teachers as well, especially those who had other complications. One administrator confessed the fear of spreading COVID-19 was real for him and his family.

“The lack of social contact with their friends created a generation that talks only on instant messenger,” claimed one teacher. This was a general consensus among the teachers. “Since our return to school, my students don’t want face-to-face discussions with me. They just messenger me with questions.” “Students lost their sense of connection to school during the pandemic,” said one teacher. “School was their world,” said one teacher, “until the pandemic.” One administrator agreed and said, “So many valued parts of their lives were stopped – no

sports, no prom, no graduation.” “It appears as a whole, students are not as interconnected as before,” commented one administrator.

One administrator expressed that food shortages were another challenge for students. “We tried to provide drive-by breakfast and lunch for students, but it did not reach every child.” Another administrator stated that his school and community would leave boxes of food for students that they knew were not getting enough to eat but some students were missed even with their best attempt.

One teacher complained that in the last nine weeks of the 2020 school year only about 10% of the parents picked up school assignments from school. “I did not feel that I could do anything more, but the children who came each week and picked up the material were not the ones who needed it the most.” When school tried to resume in the fall of 2020, distance learning made small groups and one-on-one teaching difficult. A science teacher stated, “My hands-on experiences with students and the use of manipulatives were almost impossible due to the concern of cross contamination.”

2. What are promising practices for promoting positive social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic?

“Students want to know that people care about them,” stated one administrator. “We tried to safely do this when we disbursed drive-by meals. We would stand outside and wave and speak from a distance to the students and their parents.” “Our weekly phone calls kept us updated on our students,” insisted an elementary teacher. “I wrote special notes on all the handout packets for my students,” added another teacher. “They often wrote me back which was encouraging.”

“The pandemic showed us the need for preparation,” pointed out one teacher. “We had the laptops but did not use them as efficiently as we could have.” Other teachers stated, “My

students are better – since the pandemic – at using the technology, for example like ‘drag and drop’.” One teacher said the pandemic forced her from her comfort zone into learning more technology.

Access to Critical School Services

1. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their access to critical school services during the pandemic?

The biggest challenge faced by students was their access to school services. School health centers were closed. Needed services for students stopped – speech therapy, special education instruction, life skills. For many students, the lack of free or reduced school meals was a major challenge.

Although most schools tried to provide a nutritious drive-by sack breakfast and lunch, these meals were not what the students were accustomed to having when attending school. There were no extras. The food was not hot or freshly cooked.

Students became disillusioned about the pandemic because the fear of catching COVID-19 stopped many people from having any interactions with others, even family members who lived nearby. They did not have the classroom teacher to explain what was happening around them. This was especially true for elementary children and special needs children. “My students look to me to be the constant, safe zone in their lives. I was not there when they needed me the most,” stated an elementary teacher.

2. What are the promising practices for promoting and providing students access to critical school services during the pandemic?

The administrators agreed that for most students, any special services they had been receiving were completely stopped. “When the teachers are struggling with decisions on what

and how to send material, they seldom think of differentiating material.” One of the teachers added that teachers were not always allowed to go to their classrooms and get materials. Special services stopped. According to one of the administrators, “No special counseling was done during this period of time by the schools and the community services were closed as well.” Special Education services were also disrupted. “Many of our special education students had other health issues and parents were afraid for them to come back to school even when school reopened.”

Chapter Summary

A total of 10 participants were included in this study. The majority of the participants were teachers ($n=6$) and four were building level administrators. All participants were employed in the school system during the pandemic. All participants were from A- or B-rated schools.

As teachers and administrators reflected on the pandemic and the effects of COVID-19 on their students, most agreed that the schools were not prepared for the magnitude of the disruption. Schools were unprepared for virtual lessons – not enough laptops, no internet services (especially in rural areas), and teachers unfamiliar with modes of virtual delivery. However, all schools had a pacing guide in effect for classrooms. Using these pacing guides and MDE’s scaffolding document, teachers worked to create an online class.

Several teachers and administrators pointed out the improvements in technology that resulted from the pandemic. Teachers and students are more familiar with technology. The state of Mississippi is working to see that internet is available in all areas of the state. For many schools, the use of Google Classroom has been added as a permanent fixture to help those students who are out of school.

CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, DISSUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the research study, a discussion of major findings, limitations, recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, and recommendations for future research. This qualitative research study examined the lived experiences of teachers and administrators as they faced school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary

The central overarching question that guided this research study was as follows: What were the challenges and promising practices of effective instructional materials, instructional delivery modes, positive social and emotional well-being of students, and students' access for critical services during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In addition to the overarching research question, secondary research questions were used to guide the study. The following are secondary research questions used to address the overarching research question while collecting data for the study.

1. Effective Instructional Materials

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A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic?

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3. Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic?

B. What are promising practices for promoting positive social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic?

4. Access to Critical School Services

A. What do school leaders and teachers describe as major challenges faced by students related to their access to critical school services during the pandemic?

B. What are promising practices for promoting and providing students access to critical school services during the pandemic?

This study was an exploratory, descriptive case study. Surveys were completed by the teachers and administrators from two rural Mississippi school districts. Interviews and focus group meetings were held via Zoom meetings to address the secondary research questions. Data from the surveys, from school districts, and from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using NVivo software.

Four building level administrators and six school teachers from public schools with an A or B rated school located in Central Mississippi were selected and participated in the study.

Demographic information of the participants during the 2020-2021 school year (age ranges, gender, race, education level, and years of experience) are included in the findings. All participants were school employees when COVID-19 forced the first school closings. By conducting focus groups and analyzing data from surveys, the study achieved its objectives and presented the following emergent themes.

The emergent themes for the first set of secondary research questions regarding school closures and the problems of meeting the needs of the students were as follows:

Effective Instructional Materials

School leaders and teachers described the distribution of materials to students as a major problem during the pandemic. Many schools did not have the laptops to send home with the students. Rural areas lacked the internet availability to conduct classes online. Teachers, administrators, and students were unprepared and lacked the technology skills to access what little technology was available. Even in areas where internet was available, many students, teachers, and administrators had not had proper training to effectively use programs such as Google Classroom.

Run-off packets distributed by the schools were often not picked up, not completed, or not returned at all. The fear of being in close proximity to others for belief they would be exposed to COVID-19 or spreading COVID-19 kept many people isolated. Also, run-off packets lacked any differentiation or explanation of how to complete the work. Packets required more parental assistance that was often not received due to parent's work schedule, lack of skills to assist, or not recognizing the importance of completing the assignments. Many parents were overwhelmed with the pandemic.

Educational companies rushed to assist teachers with instructional materials during the pandemic. However, the effectiveness of the materials was often lost in the attempt to make materials available. Teachers and administrators were grasping for anything and everything to continue to provide lessons for their students. Programs were often found to be inadequate in terms of meeting the rigor and standards provided in the classroom. Work that was too easy for students accomplished nothing. Work that was too difficult only added frustrations to the situation.

Effective Instructional Delivery Modes

It was reported that technology presented the biggest challenge related to selecting and using effective instructional delivery modes during the pandemic. Usually when new programs are added, teachers receive professional development training on these products. There was no training. Teachers, administrators, and students were not physically present at school. Therefore, this made it difficult for them to receive the training and support needed to effectively use the products. Many of the teachers did not have a computer at home, nor did they have internet. Hot spots, set up by the districts, were deployed as a means of providing teachers with internet services. Some of the schools staggered times for teachers to come to school and work in the classroom. By staggering these times, teachers were less likely to come into close proximity with other personnel and thereby potentially spreading the virus. This time in the classroom, however, allowed teachers the ability to view YouTube videos on ways to provide instruction to their students. Even teachers who had not been technologically savvy became better.

The pandemic forced teachers out of their comfort zones and into the technology of the 21st Century. Teachers in the schools often went toward the ideas they understood the best and most comfortable with. For many this was Google. Most teachers were familiar with Google and

Google Docs. Google Classroom was not a new idea, but an underdeveloped idea for many. With encouragements from administrators, teachers began to try to connect with their students electronically. Teachers found they could communicate with some of their students via Google Classroom. The pandemic uncovered the technology truth – schools were not as technologically up to date as they needed to be.

Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

Students faced several challenges related to their social and emotional well-being during the pandemic. The lack of social interaction with peers was a major concern. Students lost their ability to socially interact in person. Instead of conversation, students became pros at texting and other social media platforms as a means of communicating. Upon their return to school, teachers realized that students would have to regain that loss as well as academic losses. Research showed that students lost academically for each day they were out of school (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). The pandemic's record setting school closure stopped any academic interaction for some students.

Another major challenge identified was the fear of contracting or spreading COVID-19. Students and teachers are still afraid of COVID-19. Although the number of cases in the schools have dwindled, some teachers are still wearing masks, most protective shields are still in place, and hand sanitizer is distributed to classrooms by the gallons. One teacher stated a child in her classroom had a bad cough. Although the cough had nothing to do with COVID-19, it caused enough disruption in her classroom that the child had to be sent home. Students were afraid that the sick might be sick with COVID-19. Many students were also concerned about grandparents who lived with them. The students were afraid of taking COVID-19 home to their elderly loved ones.

Several promising practices for promoting social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic were started. First, for those students with internet services, Google Classroom allowed students to see their teachers and classmates. They slowly began to feel a part of the class again. Some teachers became more creative in terms of how they communicated to their students. Access to Google Classroom, School Status, and other programs, allowed teachers to chat with their students. One teacher made personal phone calls to her students to help them stay connected. This was very important in establishing a classroom community because it is important that students feel that someone cares.

Access to Critical School Services

Access to critical school services during the pandemic was basically stopped. Students receiving emotional, social, behavioral, or academic assistance were not present at school to receive services. In some cases, parents kept their children who had other health issues out of school even after in-person classes had resumed. Again, teachers and administrators faced the issue of how to provide services for children who were not physically present in school.

Included in the list of critical school services that stopped were meals and health care. To compensate for the loss of meals, the school cafeterias provided drive through pickup of breakfast and lunch. The school health clinic was also closed. For many students, the school health nurse is their doctor. During the pandemic, many received no health care.

How to promote and provide students access to critical services during the pandemic has been a challenge. However, possible solutions have been discussed. If schools were to close again, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. Zoom meetings with special school services such as behavior therapists, social workers, special education teachers, and school nurses;

2. Drive through health services similar to those provided for COVID-19 testing where the health provider comes to vehicle;
3. Drive through pickup of school meals with additional pickup locations would make access for parents easier.

Limitations of the Study

All the participants in this study were from Level A or B schools. Often higher-ranking schools have used funds to implement more technology which in turn adds to the educational opportunities for their students. Since both of the schools that participated in the study admitted weaknesses in this area, the problems faced by smaller districts might have been greater.

Using only two school districts from the same general area of Mississippi may also be a limitation for the study. Other, more populated, areas of the state may have had more services available to special populations.

The number of responses to the study were relatively low. If more people had participated in the study, some new data may have been discussed.

Implications for School Leaders, Administrators, and Policymakers

Federal funding has been very generous for Mississippi schools in an attempt to provide one-to-one technology for all students. This would be a major assistance if another situation such as the pandemic were to arise; however, laptops for students only help if internet is available to all students.

As a Mississippi Department of Education initiative, Mississippi schools have all begun social and emotional lessons with all students. These classes have given students a chance to discuss problems with an adult or in a small group situation. The addition of these services

should help students recover socially and emotionally and be better prepared to face another closure, if it were to occur.

The pandemic had definitely changed the delivery mode of many classes. Teachers developed the ability to use medias such as Google Classroom. Teachers have realized the potential that this has to assist students who need to hear the lesson again before completing homework or who are home sick. Parents are able to watch Google Classroom lessons to better assist their children. One administrator described seeing a teacher use Google Classroom to actually teach the lesson. The teacher taped her voice as she explained the lesson. While the lesson was playing, the teacher was walking around the room assisting students who needed more help.

General Recommendations

The following are general recommendations for school principals, teachers and Education Leadership departments as a result of this study. The recommendations are intended to contribute to the continuation of educational services if schools were to close again.

1. All schools need one-to-one capacity for laptops. A school policy should be established on how to receive a laptop and consequences for lost or misuse of laptops.
2. Districts and state leaders should work together to promote internet services that are reliable, affordable, and available to all.
3. Current teachers and future teachers should receive more training on how to use online programs more effectively.
4. Current teachers and future teachers should receive training on how to record their classes for use on Google Classroom or other type medias, conduct Zoom or other online meetings, digitize materials, and maintain rigor in online courses.

5. Criteria for special services implementation during school closures should become policy.

6. All schools should establish social and emotional resources for students. These resources should provide students with coping mechanisms for a variety of situations including but not limited to social isolation, general anxiety, loss of loved ones, and fear of diseases.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The following are recommendations for future research studies. Qualitative and quantitative research studies may be conducted to contribute to the continuation of school during school closures.

1. A study of academic loss would be advantageous, especially done several years after the pandemic to see how long it takes for students to regain the academic loss.

2. A qualitative study on the changes that have/are occurring in the schools dealing with delivery of material and the use of technology within the classroom would be helpful research on school closings.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND INSTRUCTORS

Questions for Administrators

1. What is your definition of “effective” instruction materials used during the pandemic?
2. What does the selection process for instructional materials look like?
3. As an administrator during the pandemic, what role did you play in the selection of materials?
4. What support or guidance did administration give to teachers regarding the use of instructional materials?
5. What did you, as an administrator, see as the most effective instructional delivery mode used during the pandemic?
6. What role did you play in establishing delivery modes for your school?
7. What support did administration give to teachers regarding instructional delivery?
8. What were the biggest challenges/concerns you faced in meeting the needs of your students and families during the pandemic?
9. What are the most promising practices for selecting instructional materials and the delivery of these materials?
10. What is the greatest lesson learned from the pandemic for educators?

Questions for Instructors

1. What is the definition of “effective” instruction materials used during the pandemic?
2. What does the selection process for instructional materials look like?
3. As an instructor during the pandemic, what role did you play in the selection of materials?
4. What support or guidance did you receive regarding the use of instructional materials?
5. What did you see as the most effective instructional delivery mode used during the pandemic?
6. What role did you play in establishing delivery modes for your school?
7. What support did you receive regarding instructional delivery?
8. What were the biggest challenges/concerns you faced in meeting the needs of your students and families during the pandemic?
9. What are the most promising practices for selecting instructional materials and the delivery of these materials?
10. What is the greatest lesson learned from the pandemic for educators?

APPENDIX B
IRB APPROVAL

From: tss132@msstate.edu
Sent Date: Thursday, August 04, 2022 12:29:52 PM
To: mbl225@msstate.edu, htc1@msstate.edu, lah19@msstate.edu, pwt32@msstate.edu, sbk2@msstate.edu
Cc:
Bcc:
Subject: Do Not Reply: Approval Notice for Study # IRB-22-271, Experiences of School Administrators and Teachers: Challenges and Promising Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Message:

Protocol ID: IRB-22-271
Principal Investigator: Myron Labat Jr.
Protocol Title: Experiences of School Administrators and Teachers: Challenges and Promising Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approval Date: August 04, 2022
Expiration Date: August 03, 2027

****This is a system-generated email. Please DO NOT REPLY to this email. If you have questions, please contact your HRPP administrator directly.****

The above referenced study has been approved. *For Expedited and Full Board approved studies, you are REQUIRED to use the current, stamped versions of your approved consent, assent, parental permission and recruitment documents.*

To access your approval documents, log into myProtocol and click on the protocol number to open the approved study. Your official approval letter can be found under the Event History section. All stamped documents (e.g., consent, recruitment) can be found in the Attachment section and are labeled accordingly.

If you have any questions that the HRPP can assist you in answering, please do not hesitate to contact us at irb@research.msstate.edu or 662.325.5220.

Please take a minute to tell us about your experience in the survey below.
https://msstate.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9AcDZP2nfRHHV6ei