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# PEER OBSERVATIONS AND FEEDBACK IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS

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PEER OBSERVATIONS AND FEEDBACK IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS

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**ABSTRACT**

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The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in several challenges for students and teachers in the United States. The introduction of virtual instruction was a challenge for many, especially teachers. As many educators attempted to determine how to best support their students and teachers, the latter looked for ways to create lessons and connect with students like they had not done before. A solution to help teachers navigate the time spent teaching virtually was peer observations during lessons, which allowed them to seek help from expert teachers as well as lend a hand to those who were struggling. Peer observations have been used in secondary education and other educational settings for over 50 years. During the pandemic, teachers relied upon one another for the same kind of support and expertise. For example, teachers in an urban eastern Texas city who faced the rapid implementation of virtual teaching during the pandemic asserted that peer observations as well as other forms of peer support helped many of them get through the struggles of virtual instruction. This interpretative phenomenological analysis employs Lev Vygotsky's and Jenni Donohoo's constructivist framework to answer the following questions: What are secondary teachers' perceptions about leveraging virtual peer observations and feedback as a professional development tool?

How do secondary teachers feel about the use of peer observations in virtual secondary classrooms? How do secondary teachers define peer observations for professional development? How do secondary teachers perceive the role of virtual peer observations in their professional practice? An analysis of six interview transcripts detailing the participating teachers' experiences with virtual instruction and peer observations revealed five major themes: virtual peer observations, relationships, support and lack thereof, stress, and time. The study shows how teachers felt barely prepared to teach virtually in the early months of the pandemic, after March 2020, and how they almost fully relied on one another for support and direction regarding instruction. Recommendations for practice include continued professional development in digital learning and peer observations as well as expanded access to other teachers on other campuses to understand how they teach, manage their classrooms, and formulate lessons.

## DEDICATION

To my father, Dr. Jitendra R. Mehta,

for inspiring me to live a full life and a life of service to others.

I love you, I miss you, and I hope I made you proud.

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**Prologue**

This paper on the role of peer observations in virtual classrooms combines the values that I have as an educator and mentor in ensuring that every student receives equitable education and that teachers are well supported to best meet the needs of their students. In the ever-changing educational environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, schools have had to get creative with how they support and retain teachers. Since schools are expected to do more with less and more teachers are leaving the classroom due to a lack of support as well as other challenges, peer observations can be a way to support teachers through the expertise of their colleagues.

Peer observations can be one form of support for teachers. The school in which this study was conducted used peer observations prior to the onset of the pandemic. Therefore, teachers and administrators were already familiar with the concept of peer observations in the physical setting and only needed to adapt to the virtual setting. This contextual background is important as the implementation and adoption of virtual peer observations was likely significantly different in other settings wherein there was no precedent of any form of peer observation. I hope that by learning more about how to better support educators, the success of future generations in the classroom both in person and virtually can be supported.

# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTON

## Problem Statement

The need for innovative pedagogy has never as necessary as it is today. The continuously changing landscape in the field of education necessitates change in instructional approaches to meet the needs of the diversifying student population. This was even more paramount within the parameters of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers felt more isolated than ever, during a time when they required the most support. In congruence with other professions, the pandemic lead to increased mental stress among teachers (Salari et al., 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, teachers' time and support for them have been spread thin. They are now expected to do more with less time, leading to further burnout (Weißenfels et al., 2021).

Teaching is a team endeavor, and it is imperative that educational leaders find solutions to allow teachers the time and forum to collaborate and learn from one another. A potential solution is the use of peer observations to support teachers' collective efficacy. Peer observations provide educators the opportunity to observe each other in the classroom and learn in a truly collaborative modality.

There is little to no research analyzing how secondary teachers view the use of virtual peer observations. Much remains to be elucidated about this topic, from the potential benefits to perceived drawbacks. To mitigate burnout, teachers must feel supported. In this context, peer observations can play a critical role in providing them with the much-needed support and guidance.

Now more than ever, teachers are leaving the profession at increasing rates. A study conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in January 2022 surveying member teachers found that 55% of them planned to leave the field earlier than they originally planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, 90% of those surveyed said that burnout is a serious problem. The pandemic has exacerbated the already existing problems with teacher support and burnout. With teachers already being overextended in schools, the use of virtual peer observations, as a formal or informal tool, can help them decrease the stress and address the lack of support.

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been significant increase in the use of virtual instruction across the United States and worldwide. Many teachers were forced to abruptly transition to virtual or hybrid (virtual and in-person) teaching methods with little training. With the rise of virtual instruction, virtual peer observations have become more important to provide feedback and support to teachers. However, further research is needed to understand how teachers feel about the virtual peer observation process and what changes need to be made to make the process more effective.

Video conferencing has been used as a tool to provide feedback to teacher candidates (pre-service teachers) about their teaching even prior to the pandemic (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). In addition, being able to watch experienced teachers via recorded lessons was shown to be helpful for such candidates to learn proper teaching techniques (Grissom, 2020). Research has shown that the use of peer observations has been an effective way to offer feedback in the field of education (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008); however, the understanding of how teachers feel about the process is notably

lacking from the research. It is well known that teachers want to feel supported and when that does not happen, they are likely to quit (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Therefore, it is critical that educational leaders develop and implement authentic methods such as peer observations for educators to collaborate with and learn from one another in the hopes of bolstering teacher retention.

**Purpose/Intervention Statement**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to examine secondary teachers' perceptions regarding peer observations as a professional development tool. Peer observations are helpful in bridging any gap in supporting educators across different grade levels and the post-secondary level (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Research into peer observations for pre-service teachers and educators at the elementary and post-secondary level have shown that they have helped educators with their instruction and student performance outcomes (Wilkins et al., 2009). This study will build upon what is already known about the benefits of peer observations during in-person instruction in secondary education and determine how those teachers feel about their use during virtual instruction. The study further aims to investigate both the benefits and concerns in implementing peer feedback and the reception of the feedback by the teachers. This is because understanding how teachers perceive their utility is key to determining how to best implement and modify the peer observations to fit the needs of teachers. This can be done at the school/ district level or on an individual basis. The study provides a perspective of educators, offering insight into adult learning models

and ways to facilitate peer observations for professional development. Learning more about how teachers benefit from this process can provide information on how to best help teachers struggling with virtual as well as in-person instruction, best support students, and help schools achieve better student outcomes on state exams.

The knowledge generated is expected to inform how teachers feel about peer observations and whether the feedback they receive benefits their professional and instructional practice. The study further aimed to examine how school- and district-level administrators can leverage such observations to provide professional support during formal teacher evaluations.

**Justification**

The usage of peer observations has been studied and implemented at various levels of education for over 50 years. Studies have shown that when teachers feel supported and when newer teachers have access to support in their early years of teaching, there is a greater retention rate among them (Darling-Hammond, 2003). According to the Learning Policy Institute, between 2012 and 2013, 21% of the teachers left their profession because of their "unhappiness with the school administration" and another 21% left due to dissatisfaction with the teaching career. The turnover rate is 50% in Title I schools, which serve a greater population of economically disadvantaged students, than others. In the fields of mathematics and science, the turnover rate is 70% higher and as high as 80% for those who are alternatively certified rather than certified through a traditional college educational degree program (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Understanding secondary teachers' viewpoints on peer observations as a professional development tool will provide administrators and educators with insights into how successful peer collaborations can be facilitated among teachers. Understanding teachers' beliefs in this regard will allow for the design of a system of observation and feedback that better aligns teachers' with their expectations and professional needs. It is essential that teachers' voices are heard and they are a part of the process to alleviate concern around the evaluative and judgmental aspects of observations. The intention is to promote a collaborative teaching team founded upon generative knowledge sharing, not one of competition and judgment. However, without teacher input, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of peer observations. This study provides a forum for teachers to voice their opinions and provide insights to help build better professional support and a learning community. In addition to understanding how teachers feel about the effectiveness of the use of peer observations, district and school administrations can benefit from this study because they can choose how to make changes to their own peer observation protocols.

There are 50 years of research that supports the notion that peer observations have been a successful tool in developing educators and those in other professions. As early as the 1970s, teachers across the United States were using peer observations to support others and grow in their profession. However, even at that time, teachers struggled to find consistent support from school administrators. Many relied on workshops and college courses as the only means to continue their professional development needs (Lawrence & Branch, 1978).

According to Lawrence and Branch (1978), teachers in Florida's middle schools in the early 1970s wished to receive feedback that came in the form of non-judgmental support. That period, being an era of change, led to educational reform. Desegregation and other circumstances brought a new perspective to teaching, and the teachers were not prepared. The shift of the educational paradigm was not supported with sufficient teacher training, and there was a noticeable lack of opportunities for teachers to collaborate, learn from one another, and share their questions and concerns (Lawrence & Branch, 1978). According to Lawrence and Branch (1978), to address this concern, the Florida Department of Education developed a program that created peer panels of teachers who became responsible for managing their in-service work and training.

The panels, which comprised three to five teachers, had one primary goal: improve each other's teaching ability. Members of each panel could self-select. There were no superordinate-subordinate relationships in the panels, and the members were not allowed to evaluate each other. "They instead have to follow procedures for giving and receiving low inference feedback…" (Lawrence & Branch, 1978, p. 246). Overall, empathy and mutual support, not detachment and inspection, was the emphasis (Lawrence & Branch, 1978). As a result of this study, school administrators gave teachers visible support, time was set aside during the workday for the peer panels to meet, and teachers were given more effective feedback.

There has been continued research into the benefits of peer observations as a way to provide feedback to educators. Martin and Double (1998) found that, at the post-secondary level, peer observations were helpful in training university professors who

often learned about teaching techniques and pedagogy through informal approaches such as their experience as students or through trial and error as a teaching assistant. Martin and Double (1998) aimed to determine if the focus could be shifted from teaching content to supporting the learning of students using peer observations (Martin & Double, 1998). Using the "peer-observation and collaborative reflection process" (Martin & Double, 1998, p. 163), professors over the summer of 1995 trained using this model to implement during the upcoming fall semester. Most of the professors benefitted from the process and focused more on their student's needs and behavior.

These foundational studies provided the groundwork for the current study examining teachers' perspectives around virtual peer observations for professional development. As noted earlier, extant research on peer observations for educators does not investigate its impact through virtual learning. This research is critical within the current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which altered the face of education as many schools implemented virtual learning platforms for the first time. This study explores peer observations through a virtual learning model to ascertain teachers' perspectives regarding their experiences with this process.

**Significance and Context**

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond's (2017), based on the data collected from 2012–2013, asserted that teacher turnover in the southern part of the United States is alarming. The teacher turnover rate was 16.7% at the time, with a 50% higher turnover rate for teachers in Title 1 schools, and 89% higher rate for teachers who were alternatively certified. In addition, they found that teachers of color who

disproportionately teach in high-minority, low-income schools and are significantly more likely to enter the teaching profession without completing their teacher training had a higher turnover rate (19%) than their white colleagues. Second to "Dissatisfied because of assessments and accountability measures," 17% of the teachers interviewed reported that their reason for leaving their current school was "Dissatisfied because not enough support to prepare students for assessments" and 21% were "Dissatisfied with the Administration." Teachers were more than twice as likely to leave their school if they strongly disagreed with their administration's support than those who strongly agreed administration's (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

When teachers do not feel supported in the classroom, they will quit, placing the students at a great disadvantage. Studies conducted by Barnes et al. (2007) and Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found a correlation between teacher turnover and student success. When teachers consistently leave the classroom or move onto other schools, student achievement is negatively impacted (Barnes et al., 2007). Similarly, in their analysis of math and ELA scores, Ronfeldt et al. (2013) found that teacher turnover has a direct impact on student achievement. Math scores were between 8.2% and 10.2% of a standard deviation lower in the years with complete turnover as compared to when there was no turnover. Effect sizes for ELA scores were estimated to be between 4.9% and 6.0% due to turnover. Thus, Ronfeldt et al. (2013) concluded that teacher turnover has a significant negative impact on student achievement and that the damage is worse in schools with low-performing students.

Turnover can also hurt a school's budget. In a large school district such as Chicago, the average cost per teacher leaving was $17,872. In total, Chicago Public Schools spent over $86 million per year on turnover rehiring and training new teachers (Barnes et al., 2007). Through data collected in 2000, the Texas Center for Educational Research found that out of the 258,000 public school teachers in the State of Texas, there was a 15% turnover rate, resulting, according to one model, in $8,227 in expenses per turnover. Ultimately, it is apparent that teacher turnover has a negative impact on student achievement and school budgets. A solution to this is retaining teachers year after year. This can be done by ensuring that the teachers feel supported. A possible mechanism to increase support for teachers is through implementing peer observations. Making sure that teachers feel supported can lower the turnover rate and keep costs lower for school districts, allowing them to spend money on other areas such as teacher training.

To put this into context, when teachers do not feel supported, they quit, which leads to lower performance among students. What has shown to be helpful is having teachers feel supported, and a research-based, viable support system is through the use of peer observations and the feedback they receive (Gosling, 2002). What is missing though is how teachers, and more specifically secondary teachers, feel about the process. The existing peer feedback process can be improved with further knowledge about how educators feel about peer observations and the changes they suggest.

Studies into the use of peer observations in teaching show an extensive focus on self-reflection and self-development (Donnelly, 2007) and the difficulty in conducting a

proper observation without pointing out the inadequacies of the one being observed. Nguyen and Pham (2021), in their study conducted among six pairs of teachers, noted that the participants found it difficult to learn new material from junior teachers. Other criticisms included feedback that was not constructive and the occasionally perceived lack of sensitivity when providing feedback. In general, any adjustment to one's teaching style can be difficult unless schools recruit teachers who possess the responsibility and commitment to continuously aim to improve their teaching skills as well as help their colleagues in similar development. Moreover, the quality of the feedback given during a peer observation is highly variable, and teachers may require training on how to both provide effective feedback and incorporate it.

**Positionality**

In addition to my role as a teacher, I have also been a Campus Induction Coordinator and Master Mentor at my former school and have developed a peer observation template and plan for implementation at my current school. As part of those roles, I have overseen and mentored first- and second-year teachers, met with them regularly, observed them, and offered feedback on their instruction or partnered with another teacher to help them receive feedback on their teaching habits. Neither of the initiatives at either school was to evaluate the teachers or notify about their performance to the school administrators; their purpose was to offer critical feedback and help teachers obtain a strong grasp of teaching and reflect on their own teaching habits.

Because of my abovementioned former roles, I decided to study and learn more about the importance of peer observations and its benefits for teachers in all

departments across secondary education. I am also working on implementing a new peer observation protocol on my current campus. Working with the Principal, I have created a way for teachers to learn from one another by observing and discussing teaching styles that will benefit both. I believe both the observer and the observed teacher gain from this process. From teaching techniques to classroom management, both teachers can implement the newly learned skills in their own classrooms. It is two-way street and from my own experience as a teacher, I have learned a lot from my own colleagues that I can then take back to my own classroom.

The goal of this study was to show how teachers perceive the benefits of virtual peer observations and determine how they benefitted from the process and grew as teachers, particularly during the pandemic. It is important to determine how well teachers perceived receiving support through the use of peer observations during the virtual instruction resulting from the pandemic. My goal is to apply the information gained from this study to helping the teachers at my school develop and also offer insights to educators as well as school and district leaders across the country about what did and did not work for secondary teachers during the months of virtual and hybrid instruction. For the 2020-2021 school year, I mentored 10 new teachers, among whom six had just completed or were in the final stages of receiving their Texas Alternative Teaching Certifications through various state-wide certification programs. In addition to my feedback, few received further feedback from their assigned program observers virtually as well as in person.

To provide background on the alternative certification programs in Texas, pre-service teachers at Texas A&M University, Commerce, take a minimum of four to six courses in pedagogy and must complete either a paid one-year internship or 16-week unpaid internship. Beyond the online courses and 30 hours of observing classes, there is no student teaching requirement. After graduating, they can be hired as a full-time teacher. The paid internship is considered their first year of teaching (Texas A&M University, Commerce, 2023). The Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) Exam is not required until they become the teacher of record. This can lead to teachers leaving the field of education because they do not feel supported or that they do not have the right tools to be successful at their jobs. Moreover, the teacher turnover rate is significantly high in many Southern States. Particularly in Houston, Texas, the attrition rates of alternatively certified teachers are as high as 80% after two years (Kemp & Gosling, 2003).

As the Campus Induction Coordinator and Master Mentor, my goal was to ensure professional development for teachers and support them in their first years of teaching. My goal was to make them feel comfortable while increasing their knowledge in education as well as improving their instructional practice. By studying how secondary teachers perceive peer observations, I aim to better understand the benefits and challenges of peer observations and, in the end, help create a well-rounded mentoring program that can benefit teachers in the future.

**Exploring Bias**

As stated above, I believe in the benefits of peer observations. It may not be a complete solution, but I have firsthand noticed the benefits in helping teachers grow during virtual and in person instruction. Over the years, all my mentees have done well and always returned for a second year in the classroom. The veteran teachers I supported as well as others who used peer observations have largely enjoyed the opportunity to observe how others teach and the mentoring process. My hope is that although many teachers are not currently teaching virtually, that more can be learned about how to best implement virtual peer observations with secondary teachers.

**What I Want to Be Known For**

I want to be known for providing my school, the district, and the public with first-hand accounts of how secondary teachers felt about the process of peer observations being conducted virtually in both virtual and in-person classes and whether those teachers found any benefits of the process. I also aim to add to the studies being conducted about the pandemic, studying how it impacted the public not only medically and economically but also through the lens of the education system.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to elucidate secondary teachers' perspective about the peer feedback process and its subsequent impact on their development as teachers. The primary research question is, "What are secondary teachers' perceptions about leveraging virtual peer observations and feedback as a professional development tool?"

The following sub-questions further explore the problem of practice around peer observations.

1.  How do secondary teachers feel about the use of peer observations in virtual secondary classrooms?

2.  How do secondary teachers define peer observations for professional development?

3.  How do secondary teachers perceive the role of virtual peer observations in their professional practice?

**Theory**

The goal of peer observations is rooted in social constructivist theory, which builds upon previous pedagogy and applies new information learned from peers to previously learned knowledge. Savery and Duffy (1995) noted that the constructivist framework helps in understanding human interactions with the environment. In a peer observation, the teacher being observed gets to build on their existing pedagogy by receiving feedback from their peers. Feedback thus obtained will improve their current practices and add new skills. When studying the effectiveness of peer observations, constructivist theory is most suitable because it allows the teacher to take ownership of any problems that may develop in the classroom and correct them. The primary learner is the new teacher. A secondary benefit of this process is that the observer can pick up new ways to improve their own pedagogy, even if they are an experienced teacher.

**History of Social Constructivist Theory**

The framework used in this dissertation is determining which peer observation practices work best for English Language Arts teachers. Conceptually, peer observations are most effective when the observer can help the teacher identify what does and does not work. The goal is to provide constructive feedback to the teacher being observed. Not only does the observer provide a fresh perspective to the new teacher, but they can also glean a fresh perspective on the needs of their own pedagogy and the areas of strength and improvement.

Lev Vygotsky, the father of social constructivism, is credited with developing this theory, which focuses on the importance of social cultural interactions and the process of learning and development. Social constructivism is a type of cognitive constructivism that highlights how knowledge is constructed collaboratively with teachers and peers. In Vygosky's "zone of proximal development," he writes that to best help someone learn, one needs to be of aware of that individual's current level of understanding. Only then is it possible for an individual to assist another. Without knowing the current level of understanding of the student or mentee, a mentor cannot provide adequate help. Moreover, the observer must have the requisite skill set to assess and provide constructive feedback to the teacher being observed.

As mentioned above, Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism was developed from cognitive constructivism, pioneered by Jean Piaget and William Perry. These cognitive constructivists believed that knowledge is constructed by learners' response to their interactions with environmental stimulations. That is, knowledge is obtained

through "skill and drill" exercises involved in the memorization of facts. In education, an example would be providing students with sets of questions to structure their reading. Adding to this, Vygotsky found that individuals learn not only from their surrounding environment but also by collaborating with it. Language and culture also play a role in intellectual development and how learners view the world. Therefore, feedback provided through the peer observation process needs to take the social context into account to be most effective.

**Seminal Authors**

Jerome Bruner's main theme is that learning is an active process that is constructed by new ideas or concepts based upon the current and past knowledge. Bruner (1966) stated that a theory of instruction should address four major areas: predisposition toward learning, the ways in which a body of knowledge can be structured to be most readily grasped by the learner, the most effective order to present a material, and the nature and pacing of rewards and punishments.

Bruner's constructivist theory is based on Piaget's child development research but expands on the notion that instruction should be designed to teach exploration and fill the gaps regarding the unknown. Vygotsky believed that a person's connection to language and culture helps develop their cognitive function. He stated that social interactions and relationships with environment the learner is in shape the learning of the student.

### *Zone of Proximal Development*

Developed in the 1920s by Lev Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer" (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky used ZPD to describe the current level of development of a learner and the next level attainable using their interaction with the environment.

### *Scaffolding*

In relation to Vygotsky's ZPD, this term was originally used by Bruner to explain the mentoring process by a peer or educator until the learner can perform the task on their own. Bruner used the metaphor scaffolding when describing the "special quality" (Maybin, Mercer, & Stierer, 1992) of "guidance" in education; it has since been increasingly used in education due to its emphasis on the role of language in children's learning.

### Teacher Efficacy: Putting Social Constructivism into Practice

Jenni Donohoo laid the foundation and wrote extensively on teacher development, specifically peer learning. In the area of social constructivism, she wrote about fostering collective efficacy. According to this theory, teachers will persist against challenges and ensure good results from student. When mentoring programs designed by the school and district and state leadership allow increased collaboration from teachers, empower them, establish goals and expectations, and help educators interpret

results and provide feedback, there will be a higher level of teacher efficacy (Donohoo, 2017, p. 35). According to Donohoo, peer observations are not based on the hierarchy between a coach and trainee but instead on "… an environment of trust because teachers are equal partners serving as critical friends to each other to better understand and improve learning and teaching" (Donohoo, 2017, p. 64).

Donohoo also noted that fostering collective efficacy is possible through peer coaching and efficacy is increased through vicarious experiences and observing what is happening in other classrooms (Donohoo, 2017). Reducing isolation, engaging in professional discussions, and working toward problem solving as a team provides teachers with an opportunity to learn from one another simultaneously. The four steps of co-plan; teach/observe, converse, and document; co-analyze; and co-reflect incorporate students into the equation by first planning the lesson together and then finally revisiting the goals of the teacher and students to determine if they were met and how to proceed in the future (Donohoo, 2017, p. 64).

### *Application for This Work*

Peer observations allow teachers to stay up-to-date with teaching philosophies and new techniques for delivering lessons as well as provide them with a support system. The theoretical framework, social constructivist theory, highlights the notion that peer observations cannot be effectively presented in discourse alone (Yee, 2016).

### *Synthesis*

Theoretical frameworks provide a scaffold for understanding the background and guiding principles of the current study. These frameworks provide a basis upon

which researchers can examine phenomenon. The social constructivist theory of knowledge looks at how people learn from their interaction with others as well as learn from the environment they are in. Virtual peer observations, when done properly, allow for collaboration among teachers to become better educators for the students.

The task of designing and implementing virtual peer observations and supporting educators in their role as a peer observer can be challenging. This research will provide insights into how teachers perceive the usefulness of virtual peer observations and provide district and school leadership with information on whether already implemented peer observations are helpful. Future research can build upon this study by teachers' understanding of and efficiency in virtual peer observations and advocating for well-designed programs.

**Method**

This study used an IPA. As described by Smith et al. (2009), this is a qualitative research approach guided by the interpretation of lived experience of individuals. Thus, this study focused on the lived experiences of the educators interviewed with respect to peer observations. This involved a double hermeneutic approach as I, the researcher, interpreted the information obtained from the educators who interpreted their own experiences with peer observations. IPA is also idiographic, meaning a small number of cases are studied in detail, which aligns with my plan to conduct in-depth interviews with a small sample of educators and interpret them with an understanding of both my own positionality and that of the participants.

**Audience/Stakeholders**

The stakeholders in this study are secondary teachers, school and district leaders, and members of communities who wish to see their community's children succeed. The study highlights the importance of early teacher support as well as continued support and how peer observations can be used as a tool to provide feedback to secondary teachers. It shows whether secondary teachers find peer observations beneficial and offers them an opportunity to discuss what changes can be made to the process.

The study findings will allow teachers and administrators to reflect upon their own peer observational strategies and, if needed, correct any irregularities in their methods to help better prepare other teachers. Universities can use the findings to help shape their own teacher preparation programs as well as school administrator programs. Effective school leadership involves supporting the classroom teacher and providing guidance on what will or will not be effective in the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Constructivist theory is rooted in the principle that individuals create meaning from their lived experiences. Accordingly, teachers who have been observed by peers will have perceptions about the process and its impacts that are heavily rooted in their prior experiences. I will be utilizing IPA theory to examine how teachers perceive the benefits and drawbacks of peer observations and feedback with a particular focus on virtual observations.

In the following sections, I will provide a historical analysis of how peer observations have been examined and implemented in education and other disciplines and delineate the need for further research into the experience of secondary teachers using peer observations. I will describe using IPA to frame the interviews conducted and the rationale for my study design. Finally, I will discuss the impact of my work for educators and administrators, including opportunities for further research.

**CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this literature review is to support the IPA analysis examining secondary teachers' perceptions around peer observations as a professional development tool. Studies have found that peer observations help support educators across different grade levels as well as at the post-secondary level (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

For the literature review, I searched for terms such as "peer observation," "teacher development," "teacher development," "first year teacher," and "pre-service teacher." In addition, I examined the history of professional development in education and some of the earliest teacher education programs and standards for teachers within the United States.

**History of Peer Observations**

The practice of using peer observations in the classroom has been around for a very long time. Whether in the field of education or in other specialties, observations and feedback received from classmates and coworkers have offered an opportunity to reflect and learn from one another.

For the past 50 years, peer observations and feedback have been used as a teaching tool to help develop educators at all levels and in other fields such as medicine (to train nurses and physicians). This literature review looks at peer-reviewed articles that analyze the significance of peer observations and their role in developing strong educators across different subject areas. Considering the potential of peer observations in developing secondary teachers, this review provides an expert analysis of how the

use of peer observations has developed over the years and when history they have been helpful.

As described earlier, Lawrence and Branch's (1978) study endeavored to find a way to support teachers in a non-evaluative modality. The peer panels thus formed resulted in teachers collaboratively engaging in observation and feedback cycles to expand their respective understanding of their pedagogical approaches. The teachers found peer observations helpful and meaningful when learning alongside others and found that feedback from a peer was more meaningful and less critical compared to that by an administrator or school leader.

Unfortunately, the issues found in the study from the 1970s remain today as well. Regarding the lack of support by administration, a 2012-2013 study by the Learning Policy Institute found that teachers reported a lack of administrative support as the main reason for teacher turnover (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers who strongly disagreed with their administration's support were more than twice as likely to leave their school than those who strongly agreed.

Regarding non-judgmental support, peer feedback creates a far less stressful and less threatening approach for delivering feedback, especially to first-year and newer teachers. For example, a study on student-teachers found that feedback from peers was considered less threatening and stressful than an evaluation from a superior. Peer observation offers an opportunity for the observers to provide written and verbal feedback to help the trainees improve their teaching and management techniques (Wilkins et al., 2009).

By the 1980s, more scholarly articles were written on the use of peer observations and feedback, not just in the field of education. In nursing, peer feedback played an important role in supporting the development of undergraduate nursing students. There are many similarities between education and nursing. Both require well-rounded people skills and empathy toward those who need help and the roles of teachers and nurses are critical in their respective fields.

In a qualitative study, Kammer (1982) examined how nurses and their instructors felt about the use of peer groups in the education of undergraduate nurses. Peer groups enabled nursing students to compare their self-perceptions with the perceptions of their peers. Here, senior nursing students functioned as counselors for the junior students. Moreover, the nursing students were allowed to pick their own groups and work together to discuss their progress over the course of the semester (Kammer, 1982). Peer group learning allowed the nursing students to be in a climate where they did not feel threatened. The groups that supported one another allowed personal growth and created an atmosphere suitable for collaborations. "When students are allowed to assume responsibility for their own learning and have control of getting faculty help when they want it, faculty strengths are maximized" (Kammer, 1982, p. 20).

Even during what Kammer (1982) called "Peer-Participatory Conferences" (Kammer, 1982, p. 18), where patient care is evaluated by both instructors and student nurses, the latter offered the majority of the feedback, allowing for the former to gain experience with providing feedback as well as learn from others. Thus, feeling

supported and learning how to collaborate with one another in a judgment-free zone can be helpful in the development of both educators and nurses.

By the 1990s, further studies were conducted on peer observations and feedback in education. For example, Hudson et al. (1994) explained that peer coaching "…can enhance field-based experiences by observing and recording the performance of their peers, providing feedback on observed teaching behaviors and helping preservice teachers correct errors…" The authors reviewed six different peer coaching studies that examined whether there were quantitative measures that helped determine which peer observational programs worked best. The six studies (conducted at different times, from 1983 to 1994) determined the positive and negative effects of peer observations and feedback in the classroom.

All these studies used quantitative methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions for the teacher being observed. They included a coaching session and an evaluation of the classroom management and flow of the class after the session. The interventions were aimed at creating a more conducive school environment for the students (Hudson et al., 1994). Out of the six studies examined, Sue Englert and Sugai (1983) found no significance difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of how the teachers handled behavior management, but they did find a decrease in how often teachers in the latter group performed better after the coaching for prompting students to participate and answer questions.

It is clear through the analysis by Hudson et al. (1994) that the focus in the 1980s and 1990s was on setting time outside the classroom for peer feedback or

coaching. They also found evidence suggesting that during the coaching, the focus was on classroom management, how the classes were conducted, and strategies used in classroom to engage students.

The use of peer observation and feedback continued in the 1990s. Martin and Double (1998) found that peer observations can be helpful in training professors at the post-secondary level. They described the "peer-observation and collaborative reflection process" (Martin & Double, 1998, p. 163) as containing several steps. The first step is the pre-observation meeting with a peer teacher prior to the observation to discuss how the feedback will be recorded, what the teacher being observed hopes to gain from the observation, and the time frame for the observation. In the second step, the observation, the observer examines both the professor and the students during a class. Martin and Double (1998) noted that during the observation, the observing professor must not be allowed to catch up on their own work and must be aware of their own body language so as to not disturb the natural flow of the class. They are encouraged to make notes while observing but not be too critical. They can include details on student behavior and points of particular significance but must end the feedback on a positive note. The final step, feedback meeting, is where the observing teacher shares their thoughts and then listens to the observed teacher about how they felt regarding the class. This is also when the observing and observed teachers discuss developing targets for the future (Martin & Double, 1998).

Although this study was conducted at the university level, the implications of the peer observation and feedback can be applied to secondary school and pre-service

teachers. However, the authors noted having a hard time with few professors who were reluctant to try the exercise (Martin & Double, 1998). Asking seasoned professors or classroom teachers to change their practices or try something new can be difficult. They need to be able to trust that the change will work, is of value, and worth trying.

Research on the use of peer observation and feedback for educators continued in the 2000s. Gosling (2002) distinguished three different models for peer observing: evaluation, development, and peer review model. Although Gosling (2002) referred to older studies on the use of peer observations, this was the first culminating study that organized and discussed the similarities and differences in the models.

Some of the similarities among the three models are as follows: each model can be applied in the classroom, where the performance of the teacher and how they use the learning materials are observed. Each model can be used to assess how well the teacher being observed is teaching (Gosling, 2002).

In terms of differences, the evaluation model's purpose is to report how well a teacher performs in the classroom. This can be done by administrators as well as senior teachers. Although this method can be effective, both the observing teacher and the one being observed are oriented toward reaching an understanding, rather than making a judgment. Leaving the issues about who is right and wrong behind (Gosling, 2002).

Another major difference and one that seemed most important to the significance of peer observations is that only one model, The Peer Review Model, is one where Gosling (2002) writes "teaching is valued and discussed." Additionally, in this model both the teacher being observed and the teacher observing both benefit

(Gosling, 2002, p. 5). The observer does not take the role of an administrator who is there to judge but remains a peer who is there to support.

Kumrow and Dahlen (2002) argued that when an administrator is the only one reviewing a teacher's performance, the evaluation occurs only for a couple of hours during a semester or school year and allows little time for constructive dialogue between the administrator and the teacher being observed. A solution to this problem and reason there are more studies on peer observations and feedback since the 2000s is the passing of the "No Child Left Behind Act" in 2002. Kumrow and Dahlen (2002) argued that the passing of the act promoted innovative programs such as the peer review to improve teacher quality.

The purpose of a peer review (observation) is to assist and monitor without any negative or punitive implications (Kumrow & Dahlen, 2002). There are similarities between the findings of Kumrow and Dahlen (2002) and Gosling (2002). Both studies found three major use categories of peer observations or peer reviews in education: for evaluation, for the continued role of development, and to aid in the shared perception of each other's classrooms without judgment.

Whether a veteran teacher or one new to the profession, continuous support is required to help teachers grow and support them. Darling-Hammond (2003) wrote that mentoring support in the early years of teaching is a factor that decreases teacher attrition.

In addition to the support university or college teacher preparation offers new teachers, several studies have found that well-designed mentoring programs improve

retention rates for new teachers along with their attitudes and instructional skills (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Districts in Ohio and New York have reduced attrition rates of new teachers by more two-thirds by providing expert mentors and time allotted to coach first-year teachers. California's Beginning Teacher Support Assessment (BTSA) program found that teacher retention exceeded 90% partly through increased classroom visits and observations during a teacher's first year (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Teacher attrition is a significant issue nationwide in the US. As discussed earlier, according to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), between 2012 and 2013, about 55% of the teachers left the profession because of their dissatisfaction with administrative support, among other factors. Teacher attrition rate is even higher in Title I schools, by 50%, than in other schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). It is imperative that solutions are found to curb the high rate of teacher attrition.

To retain teachers, new strategies must be used to increase support for them, such as peer observations. According to Darling-Hammond (2003), in addition to seeking better prepared teachers and providing higher salaries, investments in mentoring such as using peer observations for new teachers and ongoing learning (professional development) is needed: "…there is a magnetic effect when school systems make it clear that they are committed to finding, keeping, and supporting good teachers as a primary focus of school and district management" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 11).

**Problems with the Use of Peer Observations**

There are certain issues in using peer observations in education. Kumrow and Dahlen (2002) found financial implications of peer observations and feedback or 'Peer Review'. "peer review." They reported that major costs are associated with developing a peer observation program that works well. They noted, "Failure to develop a sound budgetary plan for any peer review program can result in its demise" (Kumrow & Dahlen, 2002, p. 239). Costs associated with developing a peer observation and feedback program involve clerical staff, computer hardware, and software as well as those associated with paying expert teachers to be observers (Kumrow & Dahlen, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, teacher buy-in is important. If teachers do not see the value or the desired results from the implementation of peer observations, the process will not be effective. Wilkins et al. (2009) found that 18% of the interviewed elementary school pre-service teachers who used peer observation and feedback in the first and second semesters did not find it useful. Some of the issues noted were that the students did not value the feedback from a fellow student and instead wanted feedback from experts such as the professors. The study also found major issues with scheduling the observations. It is possible that, in future teaching roles, these pre-service teachers may be more reluctant to participate in peer observations due to their prior experience and perceived lack of benefit.

In the past 50 years, there has been an emphasis at different levels of education to promote and use peer observations as a tool to help develop better instruction and, in

turn, great teachers. However, further work is required in the area of virtual learning. Learning does not stop just because the students are online and there has to be great instruction to go along with it. The following chapter further elaborates on the research methodology.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a push across all sectors toward remote work. In terms of virtual peer observations, the history of the use of peer observation in schools have been popular since the 1970s. Lawrence & Branch (1978) wrote how teachers benefitted from the use of 'peer panels' that offered feedback on instruction. In the 1980s, moving away from the secondary classroom, nurses were introduced to the use of peer groups to learn about clinical skills. Although not in a traditional classroom, the use of peer groups that involve observing nurses conduct clinical work reveals that peer observations are beneficial to growth in both medicine and educators (Hudson et al., 1994).

**Usefulness of Peer Observations**

Peer observations have had a place in teacher development for a long time. Whether in general education or at the post-secondary level, peer observations have shown usefulness in measuring, evaluating, and improving job performance by providing feedback to individuals on their performance (Blackmore, 2005). Wilson (1998) wrote, "'How' a service is performed is seen as just as important as 'what' is performed."

In 1994, the North Carolina General Assembly required that classroom observations of untenured faculty be included as part of the evidence for reappointment,

tenure, and promotion decisions. At UNC Charlotte, each college or department was given the freedom to develop a peer observation process within a set of broad guidelines. With the law then implemented that mandated observations, each college department developed a peer observation process within a set of guidelines that called for a pre-observation meeting, a classroom observation, and a post-observation meeting (Kohut et al., 2007).

As part of the study conducted at UNC Charlotte, a survey was sent to untenured faculty (the observees) and their observers about their feelings regarding whether "peer observation reports as effective, valid, reliable, and valuable or useful measures of teaching" (Kohut et al., 2010, pg. 21). The results of the study included 49% of untenured faculty at the university and found that the results from the peer observations were representative of their teaching. Most untenured faculty observed either strongly agreed or agreed that the required pre-observation and required post-observation meetings were also helpful and useful. When tenured faculty observers were asked if the peer observation process benefited their teachings and teaching skills, many agreed that observing the other faculty benefited them more than those they were observing. Although this study occurred in higher education, one can extrapolate that the same process can be replicated at the secondary level and that the benefits of peer observation at the secondary level are, in fact, similar, if not the same, as in higher education.

Gosling (2002) wrote that the peer review model is useful when the observer is not penalized due to the observation. This observation can provide analysis, discussion, and wider exposure to other teaching methods. Much like Kohut et al. (2010) wrote,

feedback, whether written or expressed orally, can provide teachers with an opportunity for the observed teacher to improve their teaching methods.

In agreement with Gosling (2002), Blackmore (2005) wrote that information provided by a peer can be more useful than that provided by a superior because of their proximity to each other, leading to actual performance-related behaviors rather than a superior viewing one's methods from the outside.

Torres et al. (2017) wrote about peer observations' usefulness and learning opportunities as a learning tool. The authors also highlighted subsequent issues when the evaluation model is used instead of the "peer review model." Both Gosling (2016) and Torres et al. (2016) agreed that the evaluation model passes judgment on a teacher, while the peer observation model can be used more as a teaching tool. A noteworthy point that Torres et al. (2016) pointed out is that it is best when someone from the same subject is observing.

Torres et al. (2016) continued that one of the most useful aspects of peer observations is that the method allows "teachers to become more self-aware, self-critical, open-minded, confident, and passionate and have a sense of professional worth and be willing to try new approaches" (p. 3). A recommendation noted by Torres et al. (2016) was to have teachers who teach the same discipline observe and provide feedback to each other but have them come from two different institutions or schools, avoiding overlapping teaching styles and allowing for a deeper level of feedback.

Torres et al. (2016) did a great job highlighting the usefulness of peer observations for the observees and observers. Torres et al. (2016) wrote that while

observing, teachers can reflect on their teaching styles and notice problems arising in their teaching habits, leading to implementing classroom changes.

Torres et al. (2016) reviewed the opinions of those observing concerning what stood out during classroom observations and found that different aspects of the lessons stood out depending on the subject area. What was found in the study that stood out from what was mentioned earlier in their article was that no matter the field being observed, there was always a focus on communication and interaction with students. Specifically, the authors noted that in the humanities classes observed, more attention was given to how students were progressing in class and a focus on class content and tasks.

Those who participated in Torres et al.'s (2016) study also found that the observations were helpful for them. The authors noted that although not a specific part of the study, those who participated seemed eager to learn and take new learning styles back to their classrooms. There seemed to be a way to open up multi-faculty conversations about learning and teaching styles across multiple disinclines (Torres et al. 2016).

**Effectiveness of Peer Observations**

Kohut et al. (2010) explained the perceptions of observers and those observed in the peer observation process and the usefulness of peer observations as a tool for evaluations. The authors also described the effectiveness of improving teaching. It is important to note that usefulness and effectiveness differ as usefulness relates to how those being observed and those observing feel about how peer observations help

improve their time in the classroom. In contrast, effectiveness is more of a quantifiable measure allowing teachers to determine if peer observations improve their teaching.

As previously mentioned, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) observed that teachers leave the field at a higher rate when they feel unsupported. Thus, per Kohut et al. (2010), peer observations can be a way to close the gap. Therefore, the main goals of this study were to compare the perceptions of observers and those observed regarding the process of peer observation, the reporting of peer observations, the usefulness of peer observation as an evaluation tool, and whether either group felt the process improves teaching effectiveness.

**Peer Observations for Professional Support**

According to Hamilton (2013), billions of dollars are invested in yearly professional development for K–12 teachers. This funding goes to one of two types of continued support: extracted and embedded. Extracted support "constitutes the privileging of outsiders' specialized knowledge" (Hamilton, 2013, p. 42), whereas embedded support focuses on insider expert knowledge. An example of embedded support is peer observations.

Hamilton (2013) also mentioned that most professional development is extracted when teachers learn from outside experts. Hamilton (2013) argued that embedded support helps teachers learn from one another. Hamilton's (2013) study was a take on embedded support, examining how peer observations support learning from one another.

Specifically, this study highlighted above others the mention of how adult learners learn. There is always a tremendous focus on how our students learn, but there needs to be a focus on teachers developing themselves and how adults learn. Adult learners often focus on short-term practical objectives (Hamilton, 2013). Adult learning comes from short-term experiences rather than long-term activity.

Hamilton's (2013) study investigated what teachers experienced with peer observations and what they reported learning from them. The study included one administrator and 43 teachers. The teachers responded to a ten-question, anonymous survey. In addition, the administrator and eight teachers were interviewed. After the survey and interviews, the surveys were coded and analyzed.

Hamilton's (2013) surveys found that while teachers observed, they occasionally interacted with teachers and students, and a few participated in informal post-observation interviews. In addition, teachers mentioned that using peer observations allowed them to focus on their needed areas of improvement. Moreover, teachers felt they were more likely to apply what they learned when involved.

Buchanan and Khamis (1999), like Hamilton (2013), agreed that collaboration among colleagues, offering moral support, and sharing ideas effectively build one's ability as a teacher. Peer observations are one way to recognize teachers' expertise (Buchanan & Khamis, 1999).

In the Buchanan and Khamis (1999) study, 25 teachers from four low-economic schools in Sydney, Australia, participated. Teachers were observed concerning the learning environment, teacher expectations of students, attention to individual student

needs, and personal attributes, such as attitudes toward students (Buchanan & Khamis, 1999, p. 11).

Two years after the observations, teachers were asked to reflect on them, what was taken away from them, the feedback they received, and if they were maintaining the best practices learned. Of the four categories in the survey, 62% of the entries two years later related to the learning environment, 17% related to attention to individuals, 12% related to personal attributes, and 7.3% related to teacher expectations.

The Buchanan and Khamis (1999) study explained the longevity of the benefits of peer observations and what teachers can have for years after receiving feedback about their observations and those observing them. Teachers can expect the positive support that peer observations provide for years to come.

**Professional Development With Virtual Instruction**

As Hamilton (2013) wrote, creating embedded professional development for teachers helps teachers learn more from one another. While learning about the impact of virtual peer observation, mentioning the importance of virtual professional development, McConnell et al. (2012) argued that professional development held in person and short-lived is ineffective at changing practice. Barriers to professional learning communities (PLCs) that meet in person are a lack of time to meet, a shortage of teachers who teach the same subject, and a shortage of teachers who teach the same subject areas and who share the same interests in teaching style. McConnell et al. (2012) highlighted that teachers desire professional development opportunities focusing on classroom strategies targeting their specific needs (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 268).

The National Science Foundation funded a year-long study where 54 teachers from Central Michigan were trained to communicate via video conferencing software. The teachers were split into groups by proximity to each other and similar grade levels taught (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 270). Of the 11 groups, five groups met in person, while two (with about five members in each group) met via video conferencing software.

The findings of the study were prolific. Analysis of the data collected, including recordings of the video conference meetings, interviews of both the in-person and virtual meeting participants, and reflections from six to eight participants, found that the conversations that occurred virtually were similar to those between the groups meeting person. Specifically, participants in the study found it helpful that they could "bounce ideas off one another" (McConnell et al., 2012, p. 272).

The ability to connect at the same level or close to it and reach a greater range of teachers allowed for the ability to connect, support, and learn from other teachers. Teachers from each group, those who met face to face and virtually, mentioned the importance of meeting with colleagues from other schools. When teachers met with colleagues from the same school, discussions tended to be about students, coworkers, and administration. Meeting with teachers from other schools kept the meetings more professional and helped the group remain on task (McConnell et al., 2012).

A second assertion from the study was that virtual meetings via videoconferencing were a good alternative when face-to-face PLC meetings were unavailable. Besides teachers in the virtual PLC meetings finding the in-person

meetings more personal for some due to the lagging software between the participants talking was the fact that it allowed teachers to meet with other teachers—if not for the virtual sessions, they would not have been able to meet (McConnell et al., 2012).

**Chapter Summary**

This study is formed around the idea that peer observations have been a successful way for teachers to gain a greater understanding of their practices in the classroom, reflect on them, and learn to improve them with the help of a coworker or classmate. This study focuses on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) theory, grounded in being part of one's own learning experience. Peer observations have been used for over 50 years, with research in areas including schools, universities, and medicine. The concept of peer observations

Foundational studies into peer observations have illuminated the importance of implementing them to benefit teachers. The use of peer observations has not tremendously changed over the past 50 years. Many schools and universities have implemented peer observations without a set gold standard for accomplishing them.

However, what has changed is how they have been studied. Following the Lawrence and Branch (1978) study on middle school teachers and the benefits of using peer observations, other seminal works found that peer observations can also be beneficial outside the traditional classroom. For instance, Kammer (1982) found that nursing students benefited from peer observations for many reasons, including that the peer students acted more as counselors when providing feedback. This notion of a positive "role model" who was not in a position of authority seems to be a significant

theme of why professors, teachers, pre-service teachers, and those in medicine like the idea of receiving feedback from peers. They are experts in their field and provide a way to learn from one another.

Scant research has been conducted on using virtual peer observations prior to their necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, per McConnell et al. (2012), virtual peer observations worked well and, in this study, provided a more diverse idea of how teachers perform in the classroom with space for teachers to discuss their learning styles with teachers not just in their schools but with other teachers at other schools.

When the pandemic closed most schools around the United States in the spring of 2020, there was a rush to begin online learning without many students and teachers never learning or teaching that way before. More than ever, teachers needed to become experts on properly teaching online. As a result, they relied on their peers and administrators for help with creating engaging lessons in what was, for many, online lessons. Hence, this study now examines whether virtual peer observations were helpful during the pandemic and what changes could be made so that teachers can benefit from them more.

**CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

The COVID-19 pandemic increased teacher stress (MacIntyre et al., 2020). As a result, there has been an increase in teachers leaving the education profession altogether, a problem that existed before the spring of 2020 but has been exacerbated by the pandemic (Jotkoff, 2022).

A significant cause of teacher stress has been the transition to online learning, further exacerbating students' learning loss and the emotional challenges of working during the pandemic. In January 2022, a study by the NEA found that 91% of teachers surveyed said that pandemic-related stress had become a serious problem for educators (Jotkoff, 2022). Teachers wanted to feel supported and guided through these unforeseen times (Sokal et al., 2020). Peer observations serve as a tool to support educators in their endeavors to build their teaching repertoires and continue their professional growth. Therefore, it is essential that teachers feel supported in these endeavors to promote teacher retention, as many teachers have cited a lack of support as a reason for leaving the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Supporting classroom instruction and management with peer observations can help alleviate the pressures of daily instruction.

Peer observations help fill the void when teachers feel unsupported. In addition, peer observations allow teachers to learn from other expert teachers about what is working well and what could be improved in their classroom, allowing the observing teachers to gain ideas for their classrooms.

The literature review explained the significant role peer observations have played in education for teachers and educators at almost every level. The constructivist theory supports the idea that one learns from peers and that knowledge builds upon previous pedagogy and applies new information learned from peers to build upon previous knowledge. Thus, this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) aims to build upon the research in the literature review to include the role and perspective that peer observations play during virtual instruction and conducting observations virtually. The research further aims to ascertain teachers' perspectives on self-efficacy with peer observations, wanting to gain insight into their views about how peer observations can change to benefit teachers during virtual instruction to support their self-efficacy. In this study, the IPA paradigm allowed six to eight teachers in the Houston Independent School system to respond to their feelings about the peer observation process when conducted virtually.

Therefore, this study utilized IPA research methodology in which a particular event or events were understood through the participants' viewpoint (Creswell, 2007). Through this research paradigm, researchers interpret the experience of participants who also interpret their experiences (Smith et al., 2012). Using this approach, I sought to understand the experience of secondary teachers with virtual peer observations and gain insights into how peer observations could be improved to better support teachers in the future.

**Research Paradigm**

I used qualitative research methodology in this study to understand teachers' experiences with virtual peer observations. Qualitative research allowed the phenomena to be understood in their social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2012). Utilizing a qualitative approach allowed me to comprehensively understand teachers' experiences with virtual peer observations through survey methodology. This study employed the theoretical framework of peer observations to deeply interpret teachers' experiences using virtual peer observations in classrooms.

The constructivism framework provided the best scaffold for this study. This paradigm recognizes that an individual's experience of phenomena is subjective, allowing the researcher to interpret experiences through participants' subjective experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). According to this paradigm, individuals likely have different experiences of the same phenomena, all considered valid.

Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed for an in-depth analysis of virtual peer observations. Participants' openness was validated as the questions were adjusted to allow for an open and honest discussion and reflection through the partnership with the Houston Independent School District. I strove to engage in research with the participants as they reflected upon their experiences with virtual peer observations as I simultaneously interpreted their experiences in my role as the researcher.

**Research Design**

A qualitative design was selected for this study to better understand the use of peer observations and their perceived benefit to teachers. Qualitative researchers want to understand experiences and reflections on those experiences (Jackson et al., 2007). This study allowed for the exploration and reflection of how teachers perceived the impact of peer observations on their teaching. Following a constructivist lens through the use of IPA, this study utilized interviews to answer the research questions.

The constructivist paradigm was leveraged to understand teachers' experiences, specifically how teachers interacted with their classrooms to improve their personal teaching experiences. The constructivist approach supported the IPA model in that it endeavors to understand the lived experiences of those in the study, interpreting their experiences through their perspectives as detailed in their interview responses. The constructivist approach to IPA centers on understanding the lived experiences of those in the study while examining the responses of those in the study from the participants' perspectives (Larkin et al., 2011).

**Participants**

For the proposed study, data was collected from a purposive sample of six secondary school teachers from an urban school district in Southeastern Texas, and 100% of the teachers who participated were middle school teachers. Since this study was designed with inclusion criteria, purposive sampling was utilized to identify study participants. I contacted teachers from one middle school within the district to obtain

the sample size needed and the necessary permissions to conduct this study (i.e., IRB and participant approval).

**Procedures**

*Informed Consent*

After receiving IRB approval, I recruited teachers to this study if they met inclusion criteria until I enrolled six teachers. Participants completed consent forms before enrollment in the study after receiving an explanation of the study objectives, methods, and plan for dissemination of findings. Participants had the opportunity to have all questions answered. Participants were advised of their privacy rights and could revoke consent at any time.

*Data Collection*

Completed IRB consent forms were stored securely in an encrypted data file to ensure participants' names and identities were not linked to any information provided during the interview. All participants' identities and identifiers to schools, districts, locations, and people were removed during the transcription phase. Once transcriptions were completed, the recordings were deleted. The consent forms remained encrypted in a hard drive, securely locked in a file cabinet in my classroom.

After obtaining informed consent, 60–90 minute in-person interviews were conducted with each participant. Participants were asked demographic questions, including identifying themselves in terms of race/ethnicity, age, gender, where they taught, and what subject and grade level they taught. Information on whether they

obtained formal education training in college or entered teaching through an alternative route was also noted.

In addition to recording the interview, I took contemporaneous notes. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and follow-up prompts as needed. In addition to asking all pre-written questions, as allowed by the 90-minute timeframe, all participants were asked whether there was anything else they would like to share. After each interview, I transcribed and analyzed the data in the demographic questionnaire and the transcripts.

**Instruments**

Data was collected via oral semi-structured interview questions. I developed a demographic questionnaire and interview questions utilized during the semi-structured interview, along with possible follow-up prompts utilized as needed. I asked for feedback on these data collection instruments from my advisors and intended participants to revise the questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions as needed. Those who provided feedback on my data collection tools were excluded from participation in the study as study subjects.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed line by line and by hand. During this stage, identifiers were removed and replaced with Participant One and Participant Two, for example. In addition, proper names of institutions, students, and professors were removed to ensure data was de-identified. The affective characteristics of participants

engaged in the examination process were also documented. After the transcriptions were completed and checked for accuracy and clarity, further IPA analysis was conducted.

There were six steps to the IPA analysis (Smith et al., 2009). First, I read the transcripts repeatedly while taking my own notes. Next, initial note-taking, including an analysis of transcripts to identify how the participants examined their own experiences, key terms, phrases, and language use, was conducted for a greater focus. Third, I developed emergent themes based on notes from steps one and two. Then, emergent themes were drawn from words and phrases described by the participants as part of their shared experiences.

Fourth, repeating themes were noted until all similar themes were placed under superordinate themes and connections were made between identified themes. Next, identified patterns between the emergent themes were used to develop superordinate themes. Steps five and six then included further analysis of the language (i.e., similes, metaphors, and symbolism). Similar to the analysis of previous stages, I made a point to be attentive to my interpretations of participant experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

**Limitations**

This study included a small sample of teachers from an urban school district in Texas, so the generalizability of the data was limited. The school district had a diverse population of students and teachers throughout the area. Therefore, the subsequent discussion section includes descriptions of the results of interviews and demographic data to contextualize the results and generalizability. Another limitation of the study was the variation from interview to interview in how thoroughly each participant responded

to interview questions and follow-up prompts. Finally, some participants held the role of the department chair, which means that though they were teachers, they also may not have been viewed as peers in the same way as other teachers without a departmental role.

Being a former middle school teacher in Houston ISD and someone passionate about teacher development and the use of peer observations, I was conscientious of how my identity might have introduced bias into the interview process. For example, teachers might have been reluctant to be fully transparent and candid with a peer.

**Reciprocity**

In this study, particularly during the interview process, participants reflected, and those reflections might have been therapeutic or resulted in the need for teachers to seek out support services (i.e., a counselor and/or mentor). I ensured that I was aware of the school district protocols where the study was conducted and that the participants were aware of these services and immediately referred if needed. I wanted the participants to find their engagement in this study to be a valuable experience. By sharing their experiences, they contributed to other secondary teachers and administrators throughout secondary schools.

**Trustworthiness**

As a middle school teacher and lead mentoring teacher at a Title I school, I have worked with a diverse population of students, many from low socioeconomic status communities. Along with the students, I have seen a varied range of teacher support to help new and veteran teachers through the pandemic using peer observations. While my

perception of others relates to my beliefs, experiences, and perspectives, I used caution as I interpreted the lived experiences of the participants in the study. IPA analysis allowed for some subjectivity as I attempted to understand the lived experiences of the participants in my study.

I kept a reflective journal in which my thoughts on perceptions and beliefs were essayed for clarity. In addition, a notebook was kept for additional research on IPA and related themes that arose during the study. Double hermeneutic interpretations called for detailed transcripts and an understanding of the study's themes.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Participant interviews and recruitment inquiries were conducted in person or, if needed, via Zoom communication software. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Zoom is FERPA compliant. Participants' names were not transcribed and were referred to as Participant One or Two, for example. I understood the importance of confidentiality and strictly adhered to FERPA guidelines.

Participants had the right to withdraw at any time. If a participant withdrew, the data was not used and was deleted. I did not want the participating teachers to believe I was in a position of authority at the school or school district where the research was conducted and stated that their interactions with me would not influence or interfere with professors, administrators, staff, or students.

# CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Participants' perceptions through their experience hold much weight and should be closely examined since they are unique and provide a lens into a larger picture of the experiences of educators across many secondary classrooms. When teachers nationwide are provided with opportunities to share their opinions and given a voice, their decisions can be better understood and accepted (Donohoo, 2017). While the role of educators is to provide students with an opportunity to grow and succeed, teachers also need a support system to continue to help them grow and be the best they can be for the students. Thus, the unique experiences of those participating in peer observations provide a lens for all teachers to learn from their greatest resource: one another.

This qualitative study had the goal of examining how teachers perceived the utility of peer observations during virtual instruction, including how they helped or could have helped during the virtual instruction and potential drawbacks or hesitations. Six teachers—three men and three women—participated in the study, ranging in experience from 3–20 years in the classroom. All teachers interviewed were teaching at the same middle school in an urban district in Southeast Texas.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides demographic and accountability ratings for every public school in the state. The 2022 TEA School Report Card states that the school's population has just over 1,200 students and comprises grades 6–8. The school is labeled as a Title I school based on Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Act, as amended by the Student Succeeds Act, which provides financial assistance to schools with high percentages of students from low-income families. This

designation helps those students meet the state's required academic requirements and standards (United States Department of Education).

Each of this study's participants taught a core subject. All teachers were at the same school during the pandemic and virtual instruction. The range of experiences benefited the study because it allowed for various experiences leading into the pandemic and online instruction. One teacher began a teaching career during the fall of 2020 when the school district was 100% virtual, and the other five teachers had been at the same school for three or more years before the pandemic started. Of the six teachers, two received formal degrees in education, while the other four had participated in an alternative certification program after receiving their bachelor's degrees. Three of the six participants began their adult careers outside of education and transitioned into education years later. Finally, two of the six participants were voted Teacher of the Year for the campus within the past three years.

All six participants shared personal experiences about how they entered education. Each described a story of how they found themselves in the classroom and their early experiences. Each semi-structured interview allowed time to ask follow-up questions and reflect on the uses of peer observations and what it was like to teach during the height of the pandemic. Analysis of the interviews led to the consolidation and creation of five themes representative of the participants' views: 1) virtual peer observations, 2) relationships, 3) support and lack of support, 4) stress, and 5) time.

**Participant Profile**

*Participant One*

Participant One was a teacher specialist at the school and had been teaching for 11 years. He did not earn an education degree but was alternatively certified. Before being a teacher specialist, Participant One served as an eighth-grade core subject teacher for eight years, bringing much experience and leadership to the table. For instance, he had served as a department chair, athletics coach, and mentor for many new teachers. This participant was viewed as a teacher-leader on campus and within the school district. When asked about teaching philosophy, his response highlighted the importance of relationships:

> So my philosophy on teaching is really nothing to do with content. It's just relationships. A thousand percent with the students, with teachers, with everyone you're working with. Relationships and respect if I had to just pick two words that make up my philosophy. You can't do anything really without those two things.

Participant One has worked daily to ensure that every student and staff member on campus counts and that those teachers are prepared to provide the highest quality education for the students. As part of helping teachers grow as educators, he observed teachers providing feedback and has allowed teachers in the past to watch him teach. By allowing other teachers to watch him and by watching other teachers and providing feedback, Participant One believed peer observations could be a beneficial tool:

[Peer observations] are one of the best ways to grow as a teacher, whether you

are seeing someone that is suggested to you as being a rockstar teacher in your

classroom or in their classroom, or you're going to see someone who's

struggling a little bit and trying to hone your coaching skills to give them tips. I

think it is super helpful.

When asked about support during the pandemic, including the early months of

virtual instruction, Participant One explained that much of the support came from

campus. Teachers relied on campus administration and other teachers for support and

expertise. As a teacher leader on campus, he wanted other teachers to know they were

supported and could come to him for help:

[However,] there was no playbook. I tried to help other teachers, but I was in the

same boat as them. But when you're in a leadership spot, you just can't really let

them know just how much you're on the same boat as they are, I guess, to keep

morale up and to keep everybody moving forward.

Like many other teachers, the stress sometimes piled on during virtual

instruction. One stressor that Participant One highlighted was the number of websites

and resources to use: "It's just too much being able to weed through it all and give them

three or four usable things." Another point of difficulty during the early months of the

pandemic and online learning was the technology and engaging students with the

technology: "There was essentially little to no learning from spring break to the end of

that school year, sadly. And again, that isn't because teachers didn't try their best. There

was just no accountability."

As Participant One stated about the importance of relationships, there was a lack of connection between students and their teachers during the virtual instruction:

> You needed a lot of parental push, or you needed that drive on your own, and a lot of our students didn't have that. A lot of them get that drive or that push from the nudge in the classroom or the pep talk with looking eye to eye. And it's not the same through a computer. So, I think we saw a disproportionate loss in learning from our [lower-performing] students compared to our [higher-performing] students.

When asked about how peer observations were conducted during the pandemic virtually, Participant One quickly offered that teachers would only really focus virtually on their department. No one asked them to do peer observations, but at the same time, they felt the need to do them to support the department.

However, Participant One explained that if there were time set aside for peer observation by the department chairs during virtual instruction, it would have benefited the teachers to have someone provide feedback, but there seemed to be never enough time. Throughout the interview with Participant One, I could hear the passion in his voice as he spoke about the use of peer observations and their usefulness online, as well as the commitment to ensuring a professional and positive relationship remained in place with the teachers and students they were supporting.

### Participant Two

Participant Two was a second-generation teacher who grew up in central Texas, about 4–5 hours outside the current city. She majored in English and studied education

while completing her bachelor's degree. She completed their student teaching at a high school and then taught high school and middle school English in the area before coming to this current school. She had taught at this school for 8 years in her 19th overall year. In addition to teaching, she was a PLC leader and teacher mentor and worked closely with the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) on campus.

When asked about her philosophy on teaching, just like Participant One, Participant Two spoke about the importance of relationships and how all students can learn, "So, I think that any student can learn, and I think you have to meet them where they are. And the better relationship you have with your student, the better they're going to work for you."

During the pandemic, Participant Two's experiences with peer observations were not as strong as Participant One, but what she lacked in experience, she exceeded in commitment to helping other teachers and students succeed. One of the struggles Participant Two faced during virtual instruction was student engagement. For instance, when wanting to teach a novel, she found it difficult to teach online, even if she recorded herself reading so that the students could follow along: "I mean, I teach English. How do you teach a novel unit over the computer?" Finding time for herself was also difficult:

> I had the kids actually buy the book because most of my parents were on board
> to do that, but I would still read the first chapter and record it. But, then, I'd
> replay it for every class. But the reason I did that is because I needed to have a

little time to go check on my kids. And then I could do it at night, and then I could play it instead because I had interruptions, so that was hard.

From the day the school went virtual in March 2020, Participant Two felt there was a support system for her and the others she taught with. Even when things were rough, knowing other teachers were going through the same challenges was helpful: "'Let me try to share my screen with you, and I'll show you how to do it.' If I didn't have that support with my coworkers, I'd think it would've been way harder."

Participant Two also found that helping students virtually was a challenge. In the fall of 2020, when students started returning to campus slowly, Participant Two found it challenging to assist students online and in person. The school district had shifted to synchronous learning, where teachers taught the same students the same lesson at the same time who were in class, virtually and in person: "It was hard to, as kids started trickling back in, I guess, it was like [Fall 2020] I had 15 at home and 15 in the classroom, and that was really crazy."

Participant Two did not have the opportunity to use peer observations as a tool for support during virtual instruction but did relate that peer observations would have been helpful during the pandemic.

Throughout the interview, Participant Two was very easy to talk to. It was clear that she knew how to make the best out of a stressful and unmapped situation and found the best support system for herself among those she worked with. Participant Two's expectations for herself and their students made her a great teacher and

***Participant Three***

Participant Three was a veteran teacher in the 19th year in the classroom, serving as a core subject department chair and a mentor for new teachers. During the pandemic, this teacher was voted Teacher of the Year and, throughout his time at this school, has been admired as a leader in the classroom, on the field, and throughout the halls. Participant Three entered education after wanting a career change and has never looked back. This year was Participants Three's eighth year at this particular school.

When Participant Three spoke about students, I could hear the passion and the commitment to every student walking through his classroom door, many of whom had not done well in this subject before. Participant Three consistently has above a 90% passing rate on state exams and is a model teacher for those who see him teach:

> The most important thing for teaching is building a relationship with the students. I don't have any great math strategy. I don't teach kids volume by getting an aquarium tank and filling it up with water or building a tower with toothpicks. No, it's just, you got to know your kids. I also feel like nowadays, you almost kind of got to entertain them. You've got to get to know them.

During the spring of 2020, when the district was fully remote, Participant Three spoke about the daily confusion and stress teachers experienced: "Every school [in the district] did its own thing. There were no clear expectations, nothing. And so the hardest thing was just no expectations. And just teaching online, how to teach online, and just all of that. Everything was hard."

When asked whether peer observations were used to support him or other teachers in the school, Participant Three did not remember them being used during virtual instruction but thought they could have been helpful. Early on during virtual instruction, Participant Three felt the support would have been better suited for using certain types of technology and that teachers popping into other's classes virtually to assist them with that technology would have also been useful:

I needed, I guess, more expectations, and I needed some training. We went from hardly ever using a laptop, if they did use a laptop, it was to take a test or whatever, to basically, okay now, do everything online. I needed more training, like how to use that, how to use all the [technology], and all that stuff, and this, and that.

Throughout the interview, Participant Three reiterated the importance of relationships. Whether it be with students or other teachers, Participant Three felt that having positive relationships was required if anyone wanted to get anything done. If a teacher needed assistance, he helped. When a student came to him with a question, he helped. Positive relationships fostered this approach.

With everyone back in school, when asked about the administration's role in supporting teachers, Participant Three noted that the administration was very busy with parents and behavior issues. Hence, teachers who wanted other teachers to succeed needed to help with peer observations of other teachers:

You have to know them. I mean, I can't go in there and observe somebody that doesn't know me, and I really don't know them, because then they're going to

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be like, they're judging me, and they're going to get me in trouble or whatever. You have to have a relationship.

When asked about the future of peer observations, Participant Three brought up how the school district created videos to assist teachers with happenings in real classrooms across the district. The videos allowed teachers to see how "expert teachers" conducted class, handled behavior, and used different strategies. Participant Three's issue with the videos was that the district was so large, so what might have worked in one school in one part of the city may not work in another. When referring to his old campus, he observed, "They were tough kids in a tough community. Well, teaching in that community is different from teaching in another community, where it's more affluent." What really seemed to help is if a teacher could observe another teacher with whom they have good rapport:

> I just think the most important thing is making sure the two people, the teachers, have a good relationship with each other. The relationship, I think, is the key to everything. What was that one person said? People remember you, not by what you said but how you made them feel.

### Participant Four

Participant Four was a 25-year veteran teacher on the current campus for 8 years. She entered education after volunteering at her child's school and then was hired. After completing a bachelor's degree, she was hired as a special education teacher in another district before transitioning to her current campus, where she has served as an English teacher, a social studies teacher, and an athletics coach. She was recently voted

campus Teacher of the Year, served as a department chair for a core subject, and mentored two teachers.

Participant Four was adamant that every student mattered when asked about teaching philosophy. Expectations of students did not change depending on their academic background or where they came from: " I'm going to teach whatever child walks through that door. Okay? And I'm going to teach them. And my standards are going to be high. I won't lower my standards based on whatever [level they are at]."

Participant Four's responses focused on student success. She did whatever it took so that students were successful. Whether after school or Saturday tutoring, teaching a concept a new way a second time, or helping a struggling student with class work, she wanted the student to walk out of the room better prepared than before class started: "I try to be a teacher to all students." However, Participant Four did not like the idea of teaching a certain way and just expecting the students to get what was taught. She also could not stand when other teachers came to her about how horribly a student had acted the year before in class: "Stop. I don't care. I don't want to hear it because that's your perception of that child. They have a summer to change. I said, 'I'll make my own decision on what type of student they are when they come through my door.'"

Working as a team was important to Participant Four. She posted her lessons online for the other teachers to see for lesson planning. The teachers worked together to plan for the week while, at the same time, working independently to best help their students. If that meant a slower pace that week, repeating a topic, or being slightly behind the other teachers, Participant Four did what it took to ensure student success.

During the early months of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020, what Participant Four found to be challenging was students taking ownership of their education. Many of those issues she felt stemmed from many parents being unable to be home with their children since they still had to go to work. As a result, students were left at home with no one to motivate them to finish their work:

> You're still held to certain expectations, and there's certain things that you need to do to be a good student. And if you are just sitting at home sleeping, or four tabs open, and I'm playing in the background, but you've got me muted, and you're playing your games, that's not even participating in your education.

> Participant Four spoke openly about the importance of teamwork and relying on one another for support during virtual instruction. For example, whenever a question was asked or teachers were unsure about something, they would reach out to one another for support. She insisted it was usually the teachers who would reach out to each other, not the administration reaching out to them.

When further asked about support, particularly support with technology, Participant Four agreed with Participant Three that the district videos to support teachers did not replace the connection teachers had in supporting one another. As someone who admittedly struggled with technology and needed more than just watching a tutorial video on how to use the technology, she shared,

> I can sit and watch a tutorial, but it helps me if I'm watching somebody do it, truly watching somebody do it. And maybe the person that's doing the tech training online, they know what they're doing. And I can back them up and

repeat them. But it's not the same as having somebody in person, person to person, and they can go around and help you and assist you if you're totally messing up.

Concerning observations, as the department chair, she is now required to observe teachers in person. During the pandemic, she was not required, so Participant Four did not observe anyone. She met with teachers virtually to offer or receive support, but nothing was formal. During the interview, Participant Four voiced their support for using peer observations during the pandemic's virtual instruction:

It would've helped me just to see how people were doing things. But you know, you felt like, God, when I go offline, I just don't want to do anything because I'm so overwhelmed right now because it was so much. But I think that would've benefited, and we could have kept tabs on what was going on in the classrooms.

### Participant Five

Participant Five was a veteran teacher with over 20 years in the classroom whose career first started teaching in California, followed by a charter school in Texas before transitioning to this current school. This year was the participant's seventh at this current school, including serving as a teacher leader on campus, mentoring other teachers, and having experience running the summer school program. Participant Five held a master's degree in curriculum and instruction.

When asked about a philosophy of teaching, Participant Five's views had drastically changed over the past 10 years: "I feel like our job is to really pour as much

positivity into the lives of these children. It's not just about education. It's not just about reading." When asked about the role of relationships in education, she said, "That is the start of it . . . The rest will follow." When the participant was asked what has changed over the past 10 years, her response was, "When I first started in teaching, there was this level of I can't show you who I really am." However, 10 years later, Participant Five expressed the importance of having a good rapport with the students, who want to know what is going on in the teacher's life and want the teacher to know what is going on with them, especially her emerging bilingual population, noted as some of the most vulnerable.

Like many other participants, Participant Five's time during the pandemic was difficult. Learning on the fly and how best to engage the students was difficult. She spent time working on assignments at another teacher's house in the spring of 2020. What stood out about her compared to the other participants was the stress of finding childcare for her child. Although alluded to by Participant Two, Participant Five was explicit that having a lack of childcare for her five-year-old son made it difficult for them. She noted that, above all, she would have benefited from having childcare available. Although they were home, it was difficult to support students online and a five-year-old, "I think everyone was learning on the fly, and everyone had their own learning level or learning curve, so I think that was fine. But I definitely think if there was childcare and I knew my child was still being educated somewhere, I could have been more focused."

When each participant was asked about the administration's role during the pandemic, no anger was pointed at the school administration. Above all, Participant Five highlighted receiving clear direction from the school principal at that time. The school principal was honest with them and let them know if any information was lacking from the district. Hence, it felt good to hear that the administration was with them and even confused on specific matters at certain times:

> [The principal] was very supportive. I just feel, in general, with her having our back the entire time, whatever we needed, we could ask for. For the most part, there was nothing off-the-table. For the most part, right? I feel like she did everything she could. I do feel like we were all in it together. And as she was leading us through this, I felt led through it. I felt like I could trust her.

When asked about the role that observations played at school before and after the pandemic, Participant Five liked the idea of peer observations but wished they were more structured. She expressed that the teachers should be more internally reflecting on their teaching abilities than other teachers observing them. Although noted by Participant Five, if there is a good relationship between two teachers and both teachers agree that the peer observations would be a good idea, they would be comfortable with the idea. In the past, she felt that peer observations were used more as an "I gotcha" instead of being used as a helpful tool.

During the pandemic, Participant Five noted that peer observations would have helped struggling teachers, but there were so many teachers struggling that it would have been difficult: "[If ] there was someone who was killing it in this virtual world,

then that's where we should have gone. But, a lot of the new teachers actually were more technologically savvy than we were."

*Participant Six*

Participant Six was a third-year teacher in his second career. He completed an alternative certification program while teaching fully virtually during the first year in the fall of 2020. Participant Six was an easy-going, relaxed teacher eager to help students learn about the world around them. Before formally teaching, he worked with marginalized groups, including refugees and immigrants, and was bilingual, speaking both English and Spanish.

When asked about a philosophy of teaching, Participant Six immediately spoke about relationships, expressing that nothing could be done without relationships—only after a positive relationship was established could the learning begin:

> Once I have a relationship with the student, then I can focus on the meat and potatoes, the academic. But once there's trust, especially trust and understanding between the kids and I, and they feel comfortable around me, then I feel that I can start along with the academics.

When asked about the importance of working as a team, Participant Six quickly highlighted that he felt lucky to be at a school where teacher collaboration was an everyday occurrence: "Everybody pitches in, and everybody works together. Some of them will tell you, hey, this is what works for me. It might work for you. And so it's a very collaborative atmosphere."

As a first-year teacher coming into a fully virtual school year, Participant Six spoke about his challenges. Looking back, he felt that some of his major problems were building relationships with the kids while fully online while not being able to see the kids, and getting to know them the same way he would in person:

It was virtually impossible to build relationships online or virtually. There are certain kids that you could reach out to, and you'd build that relationship. But for other kids, it was definitely an impossibility . . . It doesn't supplement being there in person, face-to-face, getting to know somebody, and building that relationship.

Moreover, there were technology issues. Participant Six was pretty confident in his ability to learn the new technology, but when it did not work due to a district-wide issue, it caused major issues for him and the other teachers:

The platform was just all over the place. [Microsoft] Teams would work one day and another day wouldn't work. And technology can really . . . It's helpful, but then when it's not helpful, it's really, really, really bad. Annoying when it's not working how it's supposed to be working.

Participant Six was very positive throughout his interview. He spoke about the success and victories through the school time being virtual, seeing students use technology like they did, being creative with assignments, and supporting one another: "Nobody gave up. We just persevered, and even if we had to make it up as we went. We did our best, and we made it out alive on the other side."

When asked about the support he received, Participant Six was happy to say that people checked up on him all the time. In October 2020, face-to-face instruction began again, and students were taught in person and virtually simultaneously, so classroom management was difficult. Although few students were in the classroom at first, assisting students in person and virtually became a challenge:

> I think classroom management. But at the same time, it was a difficult time for everybody. Even seasoned teachers had to deal with this simultaneously. And so classroom management, I think, might have been a sticking point for a lot of teachers, even teachers that have been there, because it's a new situation. I tended to forget the kiddos online. And I'm lecturing, and I'm engaged with the kids who are physically there. And then, at times, I would lose my focus on the poor kiddos at home. That's something that I failed miserably at. I wish I could go back and do that all over again.

When Participant Six spoke about using peer observations during virtual instruction, he was sure to mention a love-hate relationship with it. Although other teachers came in to help, at times, he still felt judged:

> Love it because your peers know exactly what the word means. Your peers that know what you're going through, know the process, have the experience. So they give you another perspective, and they know what you're going through. The hate part is, I'm not going to lie; sometimes, it's nerve-racking. I just hate being judged and feel that way . . . I don't like that.

When asked further how he felt judged, Participant Six explained he felt slightly

nervous about an experienced teacher coming and watching how he was doing.

However, when asked if he enjoyed watching other teachers teach and if he could take

away from that experience, Participant Six said excitedly, "Yes! If one of our

colleagues, one of our peers, is showing us something that they're doing that's

successful, well, obviously, that's going to be of great help. Especially me personally, I

learn probably the quickest visually."

The interview closed with a question about future virtual peer observations and

whether they could be helpful. Participant Six pointed out that if he could watch

teachers teach in other parts of the country, such as in Seattle or Miami, there could also

be benefits—it did not just have to be teachers in his school:

> We're collectively, we're seeing other teachers, a lot of minds, a lot of great
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> minds out there, they have great advice or great ways that they're doing
>
> something. It's like the founding fathers, when we started this country, we took a
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> little bit from the Romans, we took a little bit from the Greeks, we took a little
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> bit from the English and built, not a perfect system, but hey, it was a system
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> that's worked for us all these years.

**Participant Synthesis**

All six participants presented a unique perspective of their own experiences

through the pandemic, virtual instruction, the support they received, and their comfort

and experience with peer observations. Each of their experiences helped shape their

perspective on the use of peer observations during virtual instruction and led them to

trust or distrust this process in the future. The coding analysis for these interviews

revealed deep parallels in their responses and created strong repeating themes that

represent the collective experiences of the participants. The participant's responses are

used to explicate the following themes: virtual peer observations, relationships, support

and lack thereof, stress, and time. The following section reviews the five most important

themes found and their corresponding subthemes.

### *Theme One: Virtual Peer Observations*

The present theme sought to examine the participants' experiences with peer

observations. As part of the semistructured interviews, the teachers provided their

experiences with peer observations before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and the

role virtual peer observations can play in the future. A combination of In vivo coding

and provisional coding found that the experiences of each participant using peer

observations as a tool for themselves and others at school drastically differed. The

process of abstraction and subsumption brought together the different experiences and

opinions regarding peer observations, including both in-person and virtual peer

observations. The participants explained there was the option and push to be part of peer

observations on campus in the past, either by observing other teachers or by being

observed yourself. Five of the six teachers who participated in the study were mentors

on campus for newer teachers. As part of that mentorship, those teachers met and, at

times, observed one another, even prior to the virtual instruction during the pandemic.

None of the teachers mentioned any formal training to prepare them to observe others,

other than a in-person peer observation form that teachers could use to record their feedback for the teacher being observed.

Regarding March 2020, when the district went rapidly online, many of the teachers discussed how chaotic and unsure of things were at the time. That period did not allow teachers to focus on others. No matter if the teacher was a veteran or rookie, teaching virtually was a new experience for everyone. Some of the participants, such as Participants Two and Three, spent time making videos and assisting other teachers directly with technology, software, and ideas for lessons. Each of the other participants, at some point in the interview, spoke directly about Participants One and Three, who took charge of assisting other teachers.

All the participants agreed that more should have been done to support teachers, so students could succeed. Participant Three noted there was not a high expectation of students at the time, which led to some students and teachers doing very little. Many teachers made great efforts, but a few acted like spring 2020 was a vacation. This situation left many teachers who were trying their hardest, such as the ones interviewed, in a difficult position because the expectation for the students had changed. There was less accountability for the work being completed by the students as well. Participant Three stated, "I feel like a lot of teachers used it as a vacation. They just left. I mean, because some teachers just never even joined online, you know?"

Participant One noted challenges regarding assisting her teachers: "I tried to help other teachers, but I was in the same boat as them, but when you're in a leadership

spot, you just can't really let them know just how much you're in the same boat as they are, I guess, to keep morale up and to keep everybody moving forward."

Of the six participants, Participants One, Three, and Six participated in virtual peer observations during the pandemic. Participants One and Three observed other teachers and met with them to provide feedback and support. Participant Six, a first-year teacher in fall 2020, was observed and provided with feedback, as well as observing other expert teachers to bring back ideas to their classroom. Much of the support received and provided centered on technology, engaging lessons for students, and how to manage time.

**Reflecting on Virtual Instruction.** When the participants were asked to reflect on their experience with fully virtual and simultaneous instruction, as well as whether virtual peer observations should have been utilized more, all six agreed it would have been helpful. Participant Six noted that although it was a difficult time for everyone, being a new teacher and having students in the classroom and online was very difficult. Having a teacher visit their classroom even virtually would have been a great support system.

Participant One took the idea a little further than the others and wanted there to be a way that teachers can view one another across the United States. A database of videos could include all subjects, and videos of classes could be labeled, so a teacher viewing them could search for the area they need help in. To see how a "Do Now" or "independent work" is done, these videos could be used.

The theme of virtual peer observations was highlighted throughout all the interviews, and the participants reflected upon their personal experiences with them and what they thought would have been helpful and would be helpful in the future. The teachers expressed their beliefs about the true role of peer observations and how teachers like themselves can be a great source of expertise, even when experiencing difficult times.

### *Theme Two: Relationships*

One of the first questions in each interview concerned the participant's philosophies regarding teaching. Each participant mentioned the importance of relationships and building those relationships with students. Throughout the rest of the interviews, each teacher explained how they relied on one another and the school administration to manage virtual instruction and to give the students the best education they could.

**Establishing and Maintaining Relationships with Students.** Each participant spoke about their students and how important having a positive relationship with them is. The pandemic created an issue regarding maintaining that relationship when all the students and staff went virtual in March 2020. Teachers struggled to have students attend class, and many worried about the regression of students who often were already behind.

Participant Three, who exclusively worked with students who, in previous years, had performed at below-grade level prior to joining that specific class, expressed concern about virtual instruction and not being able to form relationships with the

students in the same capacity as during in-person instruction. Participant Three, as noted previously, said that relationship-building needs to occur with these students before learning can commence. Participant Three grew frustrated that students were increasingly falling behind: ". "They're not doing anything, and they're just falling ... They were already two or three years behind, now they're falling even more behind. [Virtual instruction] wasn't helpful at all."

Participant Five echoed Participant Three's views about having a positive relationship with students and how the virtual classroom often restricted that: "For me, it's hard to say that I can teach anyone if I don't have a relationship with them, right?"

The feelings of Participant Six also reflected what the other participants said. There were some students at home who were online every single day, with cameras on and answering questions, but the majority did not. The participants mentioned that, in fall 2020, when students came back to school virtually, the situation did improve but not drastically. Participant Six stated,

> It was virtually impossible to build relationships online or virtually. There are
>
> certain kids that you could reach out to, and you'd build that relationship. But
>
> for other kids, it was definitely an impossibility, virtually. Because there's no
>
> connection there. It doesn't supplement being there in person, face-to-face,
>
> getting to know somebody, and building that relationship. But it was virtually
>
> impossible to build that relationship.

**Relationships with Other Teachers.** Maintaining relationships with other teachers during the pandemic was a lifeline for the participants. Each participant spoke

highly of teachers on campus who helped them through their daily struggles with technology, creating effective lessons, and talking about the stresses of teaching during the pandemic. Participant Four spoke very highly of certain teachers who helped them daily:

> I did not know what I was doing. And [other teachers] would talk me down off a ledge because I would get so keyed up, and they helped me. And anytime I needed help, I could just call on them and ask them. And that was nothing for them.

Of the six teachers, Participants One, Three, and Six, who participated in some form of peer observation during virtual instruction, found the teacher assistance helpful, and those they worked with seemed to have the same feelings.

### *Theme Three: Support and the Lack Thereof*

In Theme Two, there was tremendous support among the teachers during virtual instruction and simultaneous instruction. All six participants felt there was a number of teachers on campus who they could go to with questions and who took charge throughout the pandemic. It was not always the same teachers mentioned, but there was always someone to go to who was in a similar situation and who could offer support. Participants One, Three, and Six participated in some form of unregulated peer observations. All six participants felt support was lacking from the school district. Many of the participants felt, during spring 2020, there was not enough direction regarding what needed to be done with the students every day. Some teachers saw their students twice a week, some once a week, and some did not meet with students at all during the

entire spring. There was no accountability in place for those teachers at the district level. School administrators attempted to regulate, but some teachers used that time as vacation, as Participant Three mentioned.

**Support From the District.** Not a single participant, from the veteran teachers to the first-year teacher, said they felt prepared during virtual instruction. Some of the participants found the experience easier than others did, but all felt unprepared. One point Participant One reiterated, and which Participant Three echoed, was that the roll-out of technology by the district had significant room for improvement. Prior to the pandemic, not every student in the district had a laptop of their own. In spring 2020, to ensure every student had a laptop and internet at home, the district had to order thousands of laptops. Laptop carts that the school did have were emptied and given to students. The slow roll-out created gaps during the period teachers spent with students virtually, which led to some students not participating.

**Support From Administration.** Many of the participants expressed there was little guidance from the school district early on during the pandemic; therefore, it was up to the leadership at each school to decide how to reach their students best. Not all the participants discussed the role that administration played, but those who did spoke about how the school's principal and administration did their best to keep teachers informed about what was happening in the district. Even when the principal did not have the answers or solutions to questions and issues that arose, as Participant Five recalled, it felt good to know they were with the teachers and trying to figure out the problems together.

As Participants Three and Four mentioned, the administration let many of the teacher leaders on campus help with technology and designing lessons for students. The administration, which was very busy at the time, entrusted several teachers to help the rest of the staff become "overnight experts" on virtual instruction. Examples such as this demonstrate that some administrators understood the utility of teachers providing support for one another.

*Theme Four: Stress*

A constant theme of all the interviews was how stressful it was during the pandemic, particularly during the early months of virtual instruction in spring 2020. Teachers, like many other Americans, were unsure of the future regarding their health and safety, their jobs, and their paycheck. Participants Two and Five, who were parents of school-aged children at that time, were concerned about their own children's wellbeing and education. The participants felt these many sources of stress significantly impeded their instructional ability.

**Teachers' Families.** Participant Two was concerned about the progress their own children were making. The participant would prerecord themselves reading, let that play to their students, then go check on their own children at the same time. Participant Five spoke similarly about the same type of stress. During much of the interview with Participant Five, they kept returning to the need for childcare and the difficulty there was in teaching virtually while assisting their five-year-old child with their own schoolwork. Family obligations, such as caring for children, were a significant source of

stress identified by participants and undeniably impacted their teaching based on their lived experience.

**Technology.** Participant One discussed the stress of ensuring that every student had the necessary technology accessible to them in a timely manner, and they spoke about engaging students online and students falling behind because they were not attending class. Teachers were also concerned about accountability from the school district. Participants One, Three, and Four passionately discussed the lack of accountability from the district, from parents, and, at times, even from the school. The idea that everyone was going to pass and move forward to the next grade level was common among many schools around the country. Concerns about the roll-out of technology were a commonly identified source of stress for the participants.

**Student Regression.** All six participants mentioned their worry about the amount of learning loss occurring due to virtual instruction. Participant Three was concerned about students who were already behind even before arriving in their classroom. Each participant echoed Participant Three's concerns by sharing examples of when students were not on task, not participating during class, or worse, not showing up and doing the work at all.

Participant Four shared that, "Just getting the kids to take ownership of their education, because certain parents weren't able to be home," was a significant source of stress. They elaborated that, "in some cases, parents were home and they just thought because the child was on the computer that they were doing their work and they

weren't." Many participants had stress related to concern about student success, as highlighted by Participant Four.

*Theme Five: Time*

All six participants spoke about the lack of time available to them during the day to do their work. None of the six had previously taught virtually, so no matter the experience they had in the classroom, teaching students via the computer screen brought new challenges. Regarding peer observations, when there had been a culture in the past of supporting one another through peer observations, even the most experienced teachers found it difficult to find time to support other teachers in their lessons as well.

**Lack of Time For Support.** Although not directly saying there was not enough time for peer observations to be done virtually, each participant mentioned there not being enough time during the day to do much. Whether it was finding time to create lessons, meet with struggling students, or to help their own children, time was something there never seemed enough of. Participant Two spoke of struggling to find time to watch their own children at home and in class while also teaching their own students. When each participant was asked whether they had time for peer observations, Participants One, Two, and Six said they participated in peer observations, but the others did not. All six participants wrote how there was not enough time for them to participate effectively in those peer observations done virtually.

**Time Set Aside For Peer Observations.** A point mentioned by each participant was their wish that time had been set aside for teachers to support one another and for them to learn about strategies about how to teach virtually. Whether peer observations

or training from the district, the teachers wished time had been made for teachers to learn how to adapt to teaching virtually. Participant Two stated, "you have to give the teachers time. The biggest thing is, some of your best teachers you have on campus teach [a] full load classes. And it's very important to give that teacher one or two periods off."

**Synthesis of Themes**

The use of peer observations when the school was virtual and while the school was participating in simultaneous instruction, both virtually and with students in the classroom, led to many new challenges for teachers. During the interviews, the participants were asked about whether peer observations helped to address some of these challenges. From their responses, four major themes were evident: virtual peer observations, relationships, support and the lack thereof, and stress.

The interview analysis revealed how many teachers sought help from other teachers during virtual instruction, and that their relationships with one another are what helped them through the stress and lack of support from the district during the height of the pandemic. Teachers looked to each other for support, not only with their own academic needs, but also their social-emotional needs. At times, when some teachers wanted to give up, they relied on one another to get them through the day.

Peer observations were used as a tool to help teachers with instructional needs. Whether the participants participated in receiving feedback from other expert teachers or they had other expert teachers provide them feedback, the interviews revealed that, for those who participated in the observations, they helped. The interviews also revealed that many teachers found it difficult to see their students regress and not realize their

potential during the pandemic. For those who did not participate in peer observations during the pandemic, when they reflected on their experience during virtual instruction, each thought it would have been a good idea to support themselves and their colleagues at the school. The teachers' lived experiences during the pandemic and during virtual instruction provided vital information to the researcher about what this school was going through at that time.

**Reflexivity**

Although the researcher's positionality has not changed throughout the study, it is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The positionality of the researcher is that the participants were former colleagues of the researcher, and the researcher and those who participated in the study all worked at the same school during the pandemic and the period of virtual and simultaneous instruction. Of the six participants, one was the direct mentee of the researcher during that period. The role of the researcher during the pandemic was that of a teacher and lead mentor for the campus. All the participants were aware the researcher holds peer observations in high regard.

During the interview, the researcher had to establish themselves as a passive listener, and as a person who prompted the participants to answer questions fully. Although the researcher never explicitly took sides in favor of what the district, school, or teachers did during the pandemic, there was an understanding from the researcher that the period was stressful and, at times, felt uncertain for all the participants involved. In addition, the researcher never explicitly expressed an opinion about peer observations

during the interview, but the participants knew I employed peer observations during my mentoring before, during, and after the pandemic.

The researcher's goal was to obtain interviews that could be used to develop a narrative around the use of peer observations, their use during the pandemic, and the future implications of their use. The narrative was intended to express the experiences of the participants during the pandemic, as well as whether peer observations were helpful and whether there was a future for them.

The transcript analyses revealed similar responses to the participants' experiences with peer observations before and during the pandemic. All six participants provided insights into the major interpretations of their experiences with in-person and virtual peer observations. The participants' interpretations were similar, but some had greater experience with peer observations than others. Regarding the future implications for the use of peer observations, all six agreed more needs to be more with this strategy to support teachers. Discrepancies included three of the six participants not using peer observations during the pandemic's virtual instruction; nevertheless, while reflecting on the practice during the interviews, they discussed the potential benefits and issues had they participated in virtual peer observations.

Ultimately, there was no official way to ensure teachers participated in virtual peer observations during the pandemic, but it is important to highlight the struggles they underwent and whether they would consider leveraging virtual peer observations as a tool to support them through a future challenging period. In the next chapter, I analyze

the significance of these results in the context of the current literature and social

constructivist theory and discuss potential directions for future research.

# CHAPTER 5 IMPLICATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges for teachers around the country (Kush et al., 2022). The stress of creating a strong learning environment fell upon teachers and districts who had no experience with online instruction. Many teachers were willing to try new strategies, to help one another, and to approach the experience of virtual instruction as a team. One strategy the teachers who participated in this study used to assist and help one another was peer observations, a tool the same teachers had used to support one another before the pandemic started. However, instead of going into the classroom in person, the teachers visited one another virtually to assist with instruction, to help with planning, and to aid one another with technology.

There was a strong need for assistance during the pandemic, as teachers struggled to teach online for the first time. With 93% of the country's school-aged children participating in "distance-learning" from home (2020 US Census), it became critical that teachers had a lifeline they could call when times were difficult. Many teachers, like other Americans, were unsure about the future, but they wanted to create a sense of normalcy for their students, layered with continued high expectations. This study examined how teachers fared during the pandemic, the struggles they faced, and how virtual peer observations were used and could have been used to support teachers during virtual instruction. Finally, this study now discusses the implications for the future use of virtual peer observations and their benefits.

Long before spring 2020, peer observations occurred in classrooms across the United States. With the fear of a teacher shortage and more teachers leaving the

profession (NEA, 2022), now more than ever there is a need for a solidified system of support for teachers led by teachers to help one another through difficult times. Educators must recognize the education system will continue to be a challenging environment, but there is support among their peers to maintain a high level of instruction for students.

Following the pandemic, more teachers are expected to leave the classroom. When the NEA released their findings that 55% of teachers in 2022 were expected to leave the field of education, this should have been a major warning to school districts, leading to them asking why teachers are leaving and what major solutions can ensure teachers remain in the classroom. Peer observations can be a tool that teachers can employ in their everyday classroom, relying on nothing more than the other experts they work with each day, people with similar experiences who understand what they are going through. The purpose of this study was to explore the uses of peer observations during virtual instruction and to examine the experiences of six teachers during the pandemic via the following research questions:

1. What are secondary teachers' perceptions about leveraging virtual peer observations and feedback as a professional development tool?

2. How do secondary teachers feel about the use of peer observations in virtual secondary classrooms?

3. How do secondary teachers define peer observations for professional development?

4. How do secondary teachers perceive the role of virtual peer observations in their professional practice?

This study further sought to understand the experiences of the teachers during the pandemic, the challenges they faced, how peer observations assisted them, and/or how they would have wanted peer observations to have assisted them during the pandemic's virtual and simultaneous instruction. Five key themes emerged from the analysis in support of the researcher's central and supporting research questions. The themes of virtual peer observations, relationships, support and the lack thereof, stress, and time are now examined through the lenses of Vygotsky's (1978) and Donohoo's (2017) constructivist framework, as well as the literature review that informs the study.

**Overview of Findings**

This research elucidates teachers' understanding of their experiences with peer observations in the virtual classroom. These findings include the following:

1. Out of the six participants interviewed, three had participated in peer observations during virtual instruction. When all six participants were asked if they felt peer observation during virtual instruction was helpful or would have been helpful, all six replied it was or would have been. They felt that support from other teachers with shared experiences and observation by and for other teachers was and would have been highly beneficial to their success.

2. All six participants believed that having a positive relationship with students is essential to the learning process, and many thought this relationship had to be established before any learning could occur. All the participants felt that the

building and maintaining of those positive relationships were interrupted during virtual instruction. All the participants agreed that their main source of assistance during the pandemic's virtual instruction was other teachers, and that those teachers helping one another kept them from failing completely.

3. Each participant believed that support came exclusively from the school, including the administration and other teachers. The support came in a few forms: peer observations, during which struggling teachers observed excellent instruction, and mentors and department chairs observing teachers in need of assistance. At the same time, the participants noted how it was the other teachers they could turn to for emotional support. A consensus among the teachers was that the district created much confusion, did not support teachers adequately, and had great difficulty rolling-out technology to students in need for the virtual instruction.

4. Each participant addressed the level of stress they encountered during the pandemic's virtual instruction. Much of this stress was related to the success of their students, but stress also occurred due to the lack of teacher resources and training. The participants also worried about their families, their children, and their own health.

5. All the participants acknowledged a lack of time to complete the daily tasks required of them as a teacher. In addition, there was little time set aside for any professional development to support them in their virtual instruction. Several

participants mentioned they had children at home, and it was difficult to find

time to assist their own children and their students during the school day.

**Discussion of Research Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The primary framework guiding this study incorporates the perspectives of

Vygotsky (1978) and Donohoo (2017) regarding the usefulness of peer observations in

virtual classrooms. The authors both integrated the seminal work of Jerome Bruner and

Jean Piaget into their constructivist approach to education and teacher development,

which emphasizes the importance of peer observations as a key component. This study

explores how peer observations were utilized during virtual instruction, and the research

findings are consistent with Vygotsky and Donohoo's work, underscoring the

significance of using peer observations to support the growth and development of

teachers. The following section examines the contributions of the research findings

through the lens of constructivist theory.

**The Study's Support of the Framework**

Savery and Duffy (1995) write that the constructivist framework helps us

understand how people interact with the environment. In this study, the participants

shared their experiences using peer observations and how their experiences with other

teachers shaped their own teaching habits. During the difficult period of virtual

instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers' experiences were significantly

impacted by their environment, which the constructivist framework helps us understand

and enabled the researcher to analyze how those interactions impacted the teachers.

Donohoo (2017) writes that collaboration among teachers (Ch. 1, p. 18) is important. Peer-learning enables teachers to empower themselves and those around them, to establish goals, and to have high expectations, all while helping students (Donohoo, 2017, p. 35). This study supports this view because it enables teachers to work as a team, to support one another in a difficult environment, and for the observing teacher to offer feedback to the struggling teacher. When the struggling teacher observed the expert teacher, they were met with high expectations, leading to greater efficiency.

This study supports supported Donohoo's (2017) notion that peer observations are not based on a hierarchy but on a system of trust between teachers who are equals. When this situation occurs, greater learning can occur. This study revealed, through the interview process, that the teachers felt that a peer teacher observing them was much more inviting than an administrator coming in to help. The participants trusted other teachers more than administrators, so were more responsive to their feedback.

The participants mentioned isolation and loneliness as causes of stress. Although surrounded by their families at home, all the participants felt they knew little about changes at school and the district. Many had not fully used the technology required of them on an everyday basis prior to the pandemic, which made them feel isolated. By communicating with the other teachers, lending their own support, and receiving support when needed, those same participants were able to problem-solve and learn together, which Donohoo (2017) notes is essential for fostering collective efficiency.

Vygotsky would agree with the researcher's findings because this study found the participants learned best about resources and how to teach during the pandemic when they collaborated with one another, rather than being instructed by the school district or some outside source. The participants made it clear they knew where they needed to improve and that they did not know about information regarding how to teach virtually and to assist students online. As part of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, in which he notes that the best way to support someone is to understand what they already know, the participants in the study were in the best position to support other teachers because of the relationships they had built with one another. Those relationships, which they relied upon during the pandemic, made it possible for the teachers to understand what their colleagues already knew and, thus, to assist them with solutions to the problems they faced.

In the first theme of the findings, the use of peer observations supports Vygotsky's constructivist framework because the observations enabled the participants to receive feedback from their peer teachers and to learn from the teachers they were observing. When participating in the peer observations, the participants were able to reflect on what they already knew, build new skills, and form new ideas from their experience. This was the case whether they were the observer or the one being observed.

In the second theme of the findings, the role of relationships was explored using the constructivist framework. The participants reflected on both their relationships with students and other teachers. The participants all spoke about how learning begins with

their students by first building a relationship. At the same time, the participants relied on their fellow teachers as their primary support system. Whether in the form of peer observations or meeting about a stressful situation or a lesson idea, teachers learned from one another and depended on each other. In social constructivist theory, knowledge is understood as being created through interaction with others. Therefore, relationships are integral to understanding the impact of peer observations in the virtual classroom for secondary teachers.

The third theme of the study, support and the lack thereof, is connected with the constructivist framework because it concerns how teachers learned about their needs during virtual instruction and how they managed when not receiving the help they needed. Their environment, including their peers, at least in part, taught them how to find the resources they required. The environment of teachers, including support and the lack thereof, is integral to understanding the impact of peer observations in the virtual setting.

The fourth theme of the study, stress, connects with the constructivist framework because the participants learned about how stress in their environment led them to take ownership of their experience and to make adjustments when possible. When not happy with student regression and the lack of technology available, many teachers found an opportunity to innovate and seek help from a colleague, as well as offer help when needed to one another, working collaboratively, which is a value grounded in Vygotsky's framework.

The fifth theme of time relates to the constructionist framework of Vygotsky and Donohoo because of the idea that one learns from the environment. Teachers, during the pandemic and virtual instruction, spent time adapting to the changes in their new environment. Furthermore, perhaps the theme of time, or lack of time, for teachers throughout the day, as well as the lack of time set aside for them to participate in the necessary peer observations and other professional development, restricted their personal learning and their ability to learn from their peers.

**Discussion of the Research Findings in Relation to the Literature**

Substantial research has examined the role that peer observations have played in secondary and postsecondary education and in the medical field. However, little research has investigated the role of peer observations during virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, most students and teachers across Texas and the United States were learning and teaching virtually. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of literature by examining teachers''s experiences with peer observations in the virtual classroom. The following section outlines the literature and the gap in research that exists and examines the results of my study through the lens of the literature and further describes how this study contributes to the field of knowledge regarding peer observations.

**Virtual Peer Observations and Seminal Authors**

The use of peer observations during virtual instruction was used to support and help teachers grow during a difficult time. Multiple authors, including Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), Darling-Hammond (2003), Wilkins et al. (2009),

Lawrence and Branch (1978), and Martin and Double (1998), have striven to capture the importance of peer observations in classrooms across the globe. These authors all bring unique perspectives to the role that peer observations play and how they have strongly supported teachers in the past.

The participants in this current study commented heavily on the importance of feeling supported and who was the best fit to support them, which is in line with the claim from Darling-Hammond (2017) that teachers need support from outside their own classroom to succeed. This present study enabled the researcher to solidify the claims that peer observations are an effective way for teachers to support one another, in line with Bell and Mladenovic (2008). Peer observations during the pandemic were considered useful by the participants, and those who did not participate in them wished they had.

Although Participant Six was not a preservice teacher, they had not spent any time with students prior to their first-year teaching. In Wilkins et al. (2009), peer observations were employed as a form of intervention for educators and were found to be helpful. Participant Six, who was in their first-year teaching during fall 2020, when the district was still virtual, noted that peer observations were helpful, as were discussions with other teachers teaching the same subject. However, Participant Four did not participate in peer observations during the pandemic due to working through solutions on their own. Wilkins et al.'s (2009) observations highlight it is important to identify which subpopulations of teachers are willing to participate in peer observations. If teachers do not wish to participate in peer observations, it is important to consider

whether forcing teachers to participate will lead to them deriving the same benefit as teachers who participate willingly.

This current research supports Lawrence and Branch's (1978) study in which middle-school teachers found "'peer panels'-panels' helped train teachers to improve other's teaching abilities. When teachers observed one another in the present study, there was no power dynamic, in line with the 1978 study. Teachers in the present study were the equals of those observing them, assisting them, and supporting them through virtual instruction.

The notion that peer observations can be used in multiple fields, not just in education, is noted in Kammer's (1982) study involving preservice nurses. Nurses in that study benefited greatly from the feedback they received and when they were observers themselves providing feedback. This finding is supported by the present study. When the participating teachers observed others, they not only provided feedback, but also learned from the person they observed. As observers, teachers can reflect upon their own practices and learn new techniques they can incorporate into their own teaching or recognize certain practices as ineffective. Virtual instruction was a new experience for everyone, and new ideas to bring back to their virtual classroom could be found everywhere.

**Connecting the Literature and Relationships**

When the participants were asked about their philosophy on education, all six spoke about the importance of relationships with their students, the teachers they

worked with, and their school administration. This finding connects strongly with the literature of the seminal authors mentioned in this paper.

Lawrence and Branch's (1978) study examined how middle-school teachers in Florida used "peer panels" to help improve each other's teaching ability. That study found teachers had a better relationship with one another than with a superior (administrator), and that teachers were more empathetic to one another than administrators when providing feedback. The teachers in the present study noted their time spent discussing their grievances and their own stressful moments of their day, as well as when they were observed by other teachers, were helpful and felt less stressful than receiving feedback from an administrator.

In the Kammer (1982) study, preservice nurses picked their own partners to participate with in peer observations. The nurses picked people they had a good relationship with, as the participants did during the virtual instruction. In the present study, each participant explained the importance of the relationships they had with certain teachers and how they can rely on those teachers. The participants picked people based on their relationship with them and the reliable feedback they would receive.

**Support and the Lack Thereof**

Throughout the study, the participants spoke about the support they received and did not receive, as well as the support they wanted and wished they had. Data from the 2012–2013 school year found teachers leave when they do not feel supported in the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), highlighting the role that school administration plays in this process. The participants in the current study felt that

although the school administration was supportive in informing them of changes in the district, there was a disconnect between the information they received from the district and the reality of the situation, and they had to rely on other teachers for the bulk of their support.

The participants often mentioned the need for trust and support and that it came from the teachers. This finding supports the notion of Hudson et al. (1994) that the peer coaching in their study enabled teachers to offer feedback following observations. Although in the present study there was no mention of any official feedback session following peer observations, the teachers met with one another for support and to ask questions and offer feedback.

Regarding Participant Six, who was a first-year teacher during fall 2020, following the start of virtual instruction, Darling-Hammond's research (2003) resonates with the notion that mentoring early in a teacher's career inhibits attrition. Participant Six spoke of how happy they were that they received the support they did during virtual instruction from many teachers, and that the relationship and support received was why they continued teaching.

**The Notion of Stress and the Previous Literature**

Wilkin et al. (2009) write that peer feedback, as it was called, was much less stressful and felt less threatening for first-year teachers than receiving feedback from superiors. The teachers in the present study also spoke about how, when receiving feedback from those in a similar position, this was much less intimidating and less stressful than receiving feedback from an administrator.

In line with Salari et al. (2020), teachers during the pandemic experienced enormous mental stress and isolation. With more to do and less time to do it, the learning curve for even experienced teachers was steeper during the pandemic (Weißenfels et al., 2021). This view was solidified by the participants in the present study, because many of them discussed the increased stress and new information they had to learn in a limited amount of time.

The 2022 study by the NEA found that most of the teachers surveyed said that pandemic-related stress was a major issue (Jotkoff, 2022). This finding is supported by the present study, because many of the teachers, who were leaders on campus, and before the pandemic were deemed instructionally proficient, struggled to manage for the first time.

**Lack of Time and Previous Literature**

All the participants spoke about the lack of time available to them while teaching virtually. Whether because they were assisting their own children with their own schoolwork, not being able to spend enough time learning about how to engage students virtually, or not being able to find time to participate in pure observations, the lack of time available to the teachers collectively relates to the literature, most of which was written before the pandemic.

Hudson et al. (1994) and Darling-Hammond (2003) wrote about the importance of setting time aside to conduct peer observations throughout the school year, so teachers could focus on providing one another with proper feedback support. This issue

was discussed by the participants in the present study and was something they said they did not have time for. Several of them lacked time to conduct any peer observations.

Martin and Double (1998) also stress that setting time aside is important for conducting pure observations, as well as creating time for preconference and post conference meetings before and after the peer observation, none of which occurred during virtual instruction of the six participants.

**Counter Argument**

Although the present study solidified what the previous literature stated about the importance of peer observations, there were a few discrepancies between what was observed in the interviews and how the literature expressed peer observations should occur. First, no participant in the present study discussed a preconference or post conference before and after the observation. Although the teachers had participated in pre-conferences and post conferences before the transition to virtual instruction, the peer observations that occurred while the school was virtual had little structure. Teachers who observed others offered feedback, but there was no official post conference as there was prior to virtual instruction. In line with Martin and Double (1998), the preconference sessions were important to first go over what you wanted to be observed and then, in the post conference, to discuss how the observation went. With the limited time teachers had in the present study, it was nearly impossible to set time aside to have a formal preconference and post conference.

In addition, the participants of the present study noted there was very little time set aside to meet. Lawrence and Branch (1978) found that time was set aside for

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teachers to meet, and that teachers benefited more from the observations when time was set aside to meet. Except for time set aside to plan for lessons, the teachers in the present study had no official time to meet. Time would have to be taken from the planning period if teachers needed to meet for help or to have a pre or post observation conference.

Teacher buy-in can be difficult, whether by seasoned professors or classroom teachers (Martin & Double, 1998). Asking an educator to change what they are doing or to try something new can present challenges. There needs to be substance to what is being taught to them, and there needs to be value. Teachers need to be able to trust something will work and that it is worth trying. In the present study, one advantage was there was already a culture of peer observations prior to the transition to virtual learning.

Another important factor to consider is that the benefit of peer observations will vary greatly based on the skill of the observer and the openness of the teacher being observed to engage in peer observation. Nguyen and Pham (2021) found that, during a study conducted with six pairs of teachers, it was difficult to learn new material from the more junior teacher. Other criticisms include feedback not being constructive, which the participants wanted, and an occasionally perceived lack of sensitivity during feedback.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The use of virtual peer observations offers an opportunity for teachers to review and support one another in a positive and constructive manner that removes punitive

feedback and enables a teacher to grow in their craft. The teacher doing the observing can also learn from the teacher they are observing and bring back valuable strategies and tools back to their own classroom. The use of virtual peer observations was a source of support for teachers during the pandemic and the school district's period of virtual lessons. The support of teachers and the ability to retain them has been demonstrated to lead to better outcomes for students as well as teachers. One finding of the interviews was that the teachers had never previously participated in virtual peer observations, yet they now have a place in the classroom even when teachers and students have returned to school in person. Designing professional developments for teachers to learn about the uses of virtual peer observations and how they can be used in practice will be essential to any future uses.

It is recommended there be professional development available for teachers to learn how to conduct virtual peer observations, including the pre- and post-conferences, and their benefits to teachers and their students. However, what works in a peer observation for one teacher may work differently for another. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the options available to them to observe teachers in similar settings to their own, as well as the benefits for the students and school. Many teachers are reluctant to try something new if they do not see the benefit of it in practice and are uncomfortable with it. Professional development will provide the exposure necessary for teachers to feel comfortable using virtual peer observations.

Now that most schools have returned to in-person instruction, what is the need to continue to review virtual peer observations with teachers? For the observer,

reviewing teachers virtually via a recorded video of a lesson or watching a class live through video means the observing teacher does not have to be physically in the classroom, interrupting the flow of the class. The observer can also replay and review parts of the lesson. They can also watch the recording with the teacher being observed to review specific sections of the lesson together. Additionally, many schools continue to offer virtual instruction and it is possible that another situation, be it a pandemic or weather-related event, could require a return to virtual instruction.

Another recommendation is for school districts to invest time and money to train teachers how to conduct in-person and virtual observations. Many schools have mentorship programs, but there has been little training regarding how to conduct peer observations. As stated previously, peer observations are a way for teachers to learn from one another and to experience the value of other teachers as a resource. Many school administrations cannot assist in instruction in classroom management, and a campus may have only one instructional coach, if any. By investing in how to conduct peer observations, a school can enable teachers to improve while contributing to the learning and growth of their peers.

**Implications for Future Research**

There is more to learn about the uses of virtual peer observations and their benefits for teachers across the country. The uses of virtual peer observations are almost endless and, as technology evolves, so will how teachers can assess and observe other classrooms. Although this present study offers a glimpse of how peer observations were used in the virtual classroom, ongoing research should be conducted about the

experiences of teachers and the support they provided one another during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examined teachers' interpretations of their experiences with peer observations in virtual classrooms, providing qualitative data through interviews and the coding of their transcripts. The next step is to continue to interview teachers about their experiences of specific support during the pandemic, whether they used peer observations as a tool to support them, and, if not, where the support came from.

Understanding the growth of teacher performance in the classroom would be beneficial to teacher support. The participants revealed the impact that peer observations had during the pandemic, as well as other forms of teachers assisting one another. Further research into the support teachers received would be beneficial. In addition, understanding the role that peer observations can play while being conducted virtually needs to be further understood and studied. Participant One mentioned the idea of having a database of videos that included expert instruction available to teachers across the country, so teachers could view and learn from teachers beyond their own schools.

In the future, if this study were to be repeated in its entirety or as part of a larger study, the researcher will need to establish whether peer observations were a part of the school's culture while classes were taught in person prior to the pandemic. During this study, it became clear that an established culture of peer observations allowed for increased acceptance of virtual peer observations.

Another area of research would be to examine how the use of peer observations conducted virtually impacted student outcomes in the classroom, including test scores, behavior, and participation. When another adult is present in the room observing the teacher, be they an administrator or another teacher, does the dynamic differ than if the observation were conducted virtually? Would students behave the same experience as if there were no other adult in the classroom?

**Benefits for the Participants**

This qualitative study enabled teachers to share their experiences honestly and safely regarding their time teaching virtually during the pandemic. By reflecting on their experiences, they could advocate for themselves and other teachers around the country regarding the difficulties of teaching online and seeking support. Interpretative phenomenological analysis reinforces inherent reciprocity in its double hermeneutic quality. The participants had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, which not only provided insights for the study, but also helped them make realizations they would otherwise not have made without such intentional reflections provoked by the questioning protocol. The participants might also have learned more about themselves and the changes they hoped to engender within the educational system. In addition, this study benefits the research community by enabling others to review, compare, and expand on the experiences of these teachers and to offer their findings to other teachers who taught virtually during the pandemic and sought support and help from one another. One could expand on and refine this study to help teachers, administrators, and researchers regarding how to support educators as a whole. Although the participants

received no compensation or rewards for their time in the study, they were aware of how their interviews will contribute to the implementation and uses of virtual peer observations in both the virtual and in-person classroom with the goal of informing future research and professional development regarding peer observations.

**Direct Applications of the Research**

Thanks to the participants, I now have a greater understanding of how teachers felt during virtual instruction in this particular school district. I can share with the school district the experiences of the six participants, the problems they faced, and the specific support they received and where that support came from. In addition, I will be able to share with the district the immense role that teachers can play in supporting one another in classroom management, instruction, and planning. I will also use the data collected in my own practice as a teacher, mentor, and future school administrator. The intention of this study was to gain more knowledge about the uses of peer observations as a tool to support teachers through difficult situations in the past and in the future. I will also use the information learned as an opportunity to advocate for continued teacher support in the classroom, as well as in policies and curricula written for those studying to become teachers.

**Conclusion**

The months following the start of the pandemic were very challenging for students and teachers. Almost no teachers had taught virtually before the pandemic, and all were searching for answers about how to prevent students from falling behind, as well as keeping them engaged in their everyday lessons. Teachers sought support from

one another in the forms of planning, discussions about student progress, and virtual peer observations.

The role that peer observations played for teachers was one of support and guidance, placing the teachers in the position of experts and allowing them to foster the learning necessary to support their students during a difficult time. The use of peer observations in the virtual classroom will continue to be studied as secondary schools include better technology to connect teachers and students in the ever-changing world of education.

This present study aimed to learn about the role peer observations played for teachers, revealing how such observations, conducted virtually, impacted the support those teachers received or could have received during virtual and simultaneous instruction. The role of peer observations conducted virtually needs to be more closely studied because, looking toward the future of education, the role the observations can play in supporting and shaping teachers will no longer be exclusively in the classroom. It is important that teachers and all educators have the opportunity to grow and learn from one another. This point is vital in Title I schools, in which the turnover rate of teachers is higher than in other school environments, such as the school the participants in this study were a part of in Southeast Texas.

The findings of this study indicate the participants who took part in peer observations while virtually teaching found the practice helpful and useful for either themselves or those who needed their assistance. Those who did not participate in peer observations indicated that their experience with peer observations in the past, during

in-person instruction, led them to believe it would have been a helpful tool for them during virtual teaching.

Peer observations are not an evaluative tool but a supportive tool to help teachers grow and develop their skills. Schools and districts should continue to explore the utility of virtual peer observations and allow teachers to grow as educators by affording them the opportunity to learn from one another. Virtual peer observations have the potential to contribute significantly to teacher growth and development. Further studies are required to delineate the best practices when implementing this approach.

## Appendix A Call for Participants

A study is being conducted to understand better the use of and benefits of virtual peer observations during the height of the pandemic through till now. This study is being conducted by Collin Mehta for his Ph.D. program at St. John's University in Queens, New York. The researcher specifically aims to investigate what teachers' experiences are with in-person and virtual peer observations.

To participate, individuals must have been teaching within the district for a minimum of two years. Participants must also have engaged in peer observations within that period.

The study consists of a brief (5–10 minutes) phone interview to ensure qualifications are met to participate and one virtual interview (60–90 minutes), which can be conducted at your convenience.

If you are eligible and willing to participate, or know someone who may be interested in participating, please email collin.mehta18@my.stjohns.edu or call 518-588-3524 for more information.

**The confidentiality of all parties is guaranteed. No identifying information will be published or shared with others.**

**Appendix B Pre-Interview Script**

*Hello, and thank you for your interest in the study. I am eager to learn more about you and your background in an effort to determine if you would be a good match for the study. Please be advised that participation in this pre-interview does not guarantee selection for the study. The goal of the research is to identify a purposive sample of participants who can candidly share their experiences of the use of virtual and in-person peer observations during Houston ISD's virtual and synchronous class time. All information shared in this pre-interview will remain confidential; no identifying information will be published or shared with others.*

*Do you agree to the terms of the pre-interview process?* [Interview will proceed upon verbal consent.]

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?

2. Tell me about your educational background.

3. What is your experience with peer observations?

4. What is your experience with virtual peer observations?

4. Have you participated in any of the district-provided training about peer observations?

*Thank you for your time and participation in this pre-interview. A decision concerning your participation in the study will be made as soon as all the volunteers have been interviewed. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may opt to remove yourself from the participant pool at any time. Please reach out to me with any*

*questions or concerns you may have. I will be in contact within the next two weeks with*

*the final decision regarding participant selection.*

**Appendix C Informed Consent Form**

Participant Consent Form

St. John's University

Name of Investigator: Collin Mehta (Ph.D. candidate)

Title of Project: Peer Observations and Feedback in the Virtual Classroom for Secondary Teachers

<u>Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study</u>

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions you have. When you are ready to decide, you can tell the researcher if you want to participate. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

<u>Request to Participate in Research</u>

We would like to invite you to take part in this research study because you have been identified as someone who has much to contribute to the discourse about the use of peer observations in the classroom.

**Why is this research study being conducted?** The purpose of this research is to understand teachers' experiences with peer observations in the classroom, both virtual and in-person.

**What will I be asked to do?** If you agree to participate, you will receive an intake phone call that will last approximately 5–10 minutes to provide background

information. You will then participate in one semistructured interview to answer questions, clarify information, and validate the accuracy of data. The interview should last approximately 60–90 minutes. You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. Please note, your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw at any time.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?** There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

**Will I benefit from participating in this research?** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, the research may provide teachers with the voice and forum to share their insights and to inform leaders about what they need to support their practice with peer observations. Therefore, your participation may provide insights into how to design and implement professional development regarding peer observations.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. The researcher will know you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you or any individual as being part of this project. Pseudonyms for names, locations, and institutions will be used throughout to protect the identities of all the participants.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

The decision to participate in this research is yours. You do not have to participate, and you can refuse any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Collin Mehta: Tel: 518-588-3524, Email: collin.mehta18@my.stjohns.edu

Collin is the person responsible for the research.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

Please contact me, Collin Mehta, at 518-588-3524 regarding any questions or concerns. You may also reach out to the Institutional Review Board with St. John's University at 718-990-1440 or irbstjohns@stjohns.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for yourself.

Thank you,

Collin Mehta

St. John's University

**Appendix D Interview Protocol**

**Part I: Introductory Session**

*Good morning, you have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has much to contribute to the discourse about peer observations. Specifically, I aim to understand your experiences of learning about using peer observations and their uses as a tool for teacher support. The purpose of the research is to understand better the teachers' experiences of teachers with virtual and in-person peer observations during the pandemic. I will subsequently seek to ascertain what teachers want to continue to see regarding the use of peer observations. The research will provide teachers with the voice and forum to share their insights and to inform leaders about what they need to support their practice of peer observations, both virtual and in-person. The researcher aspires to provide data results that will reveal implications for the design and delivery of future uses of peer observations.*

*Your responses are important, and I want to assure you that I will accurately capture everything you say during the interview. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will concurrently maintain written notes to promote accuracy and cross-referencing. Please be advised that your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you may choose to discontinue at any time. All personal details will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used. My advisor, Dr. Rachael Helfrick, and I will be the only individuals privy to the recordings, and all recordings will be destroyed*

*after they are transcribed. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?*

*This interview is designed to last approximately no more than 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions I would like to ask. Do you have any questions at this time?*

**Part II: Interviewee Background Questions**

1. Tell me about your journey into education. What is your current role, and how has your past career led you to this position?

    1. How long have you been in education?

    2. How long have you been in your current role?

**Part III: Main Questions**

1. What is your philosophy on teaching? Is it an individual process or collaborative process?

2. Do you identify as someone who prefers to plan lessons alone, or do you prefer a thought partner?

3. What are some challenges you have faced while teaching since March 2020? What are some of the successes? What factors contributed to these challenges and successes?

4. Describe a time when you felt you could use more support in the classroom. What circumstances contributed to this need?

5. Let's reflect upon the transition to virtual instruction in 2020. How did you feel about virtual instruction and learning?

a. Did you feel prepared?

b. What, if any, support was offered?

c. What could have been offered to provide support?

d. What could have been done differently that you believe would have benefited your instruction?

6. What is your experience with peer observations as an educator?

7. How do you perceive peer observations have served you in the past two years?

8. Do you have experience with virtual peer observations? If yes, how do you perceive they served you as an educator? If not, do you believe virtual peer observations would have benefited you as an educator?

8a. If yes, what more could be done to make peer observations more effective during virtual instruction?

9. What are your thoughts on virtual peer observations for educators across district and state lines?

10. Is there anything else you would like me to know that you believe would contribute to this study?

**Closing**

*Thank you for taking the time to discuss your views with me today. I will proceed by transcribing the interview for analysis. I may contact you with subsequent questions*

*to provide clarity for accuracy if necessary. Please contact me with any questions or*

*concerns you may have.*

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# Vita

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