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Transformative Learning Experiences of Secondary Alternative School Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

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by

Erin Garrant

MA, Walden University, 2016

BS, Michigan State University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Learning, Instruction, and Innovation

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift in education that necessitated that teachers adapt how they educate and communicate with their students. Previous researchers examined general education teachers' experiences transitioning to online teaching but did not establish how alternative teachers and the at-risk students they taught were affected. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted with alternative educators in the South Atlantic region of the United States who taught immediately prior to and during the pandemic. The data were analyzed using a priori coding, open coding, and axial coding. A spreadsheet was used to code, create categories, and analyze themes. Four themes arose from the analysis of data: Students experienced academic and social-emotional learning loss, teachers adapted relationship-building techniques with students, students did not prioritize academics during the pandemic, and teachers implemented technology and real-world adaptations into their curriculum. Findings indicated that participants experienced transformative learning when they engaged in critical thinking and discourse to adapt lessons and communication strategies for students during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a lack of technology hindered some participants because they were ill equipped to engage in transformative experiences. This study is significant in that it has the potential to bring about positive social change for alternative teachers who struggle to meet the needs of their at-risk students when virtual learning is required.

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Dedication

For Quinlan.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the world into quarantine, 1.5 billion students were affected (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). Recent literature suggests those most severely affected by the pandemic came from low-income or disadvantaged homes, many of which had no access to technology (Easterbrook et al., 2022; Page et al., 2021). In the United States, 3 million students, most considered at-risk, went missing from enrollment at the start of the pandemic (Korman et al., 2020). While researchers have studied the effects the pandemic had on at-risk students, there are no published studies exploring alternative schools during the pandemic. This gap is significant because many at-risk students attend alternative schools.

This chapter explains the background of this study and why alternative schools must be studied separately from traditional schools. Additionally, I outline the study's overall purpose and the conceptual foundation used to frame the study. I discuss my methodology and why I used a basic qualitative study. Finally, I explain the significance of this study and its possibilities for positive social change.

Background of the Study

In this section, I explain the major themes presented throughout the literature review. The explanation of relevant themes provides context for my study and explains why more research is needed. The themes reviewed are characteristics of at-risk students, characteristics of alternative schools, and education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Characteristics of At-Risk Students

At-risk students are youths seen as likely to experience academic failure, truancy, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, and early school dropout (Aspiranti et al., 2021). The underlying factors contributing to these behaviors include family tragedy, lack of support, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, unstable housing, and exposure to violence (Hofer et al., 2020). Duke and Tenuto (2020) found that in-school factors such as a hostile school climate, bullying, and academic failure can also lead to an at-risk status. Afacan and Wilkerson (2019) reported that 70% of students enrolled in alternative middle school programs were from low-income homes.

At-risk students who drop out of high school face a litany of problems. For example, students who drop out of high school have a higher likelihood of criminal involvement and incarceration, unemployment, and lower lifetime earnings, as well as an increased risk of health conditions and mortality (Antoni, 2021). Additionally, Sulimani-Aidan (2019) noted that at-risk youth struggle when transitioning to adulthood due to their maltreated histories, which often include emotional difficulties and antagonistic relationships with their parents, as well as an often-abrupt shift into adulthood.

Characteristics of Alternative Schools

During the 2018–2019 school year, there were roughly 800,000 students enrolled in alternative schools (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Alternative schools serve students who have yet to succeed in the traditional classroom and differ from traditional schools in several ways (Glavan et al., 2022). For example, they offer smaller class sizes with a lower student-to-teacher ratio, which helps to create a positive, student-centered

classroom (Ewing et al., 2021). According to Hofer et al. (2020), this positive climate nurtures student autonomy and accountability. Additionally, alternative schools incorporate flexibility and student choice into the curriculum, focusing on real-life learning and applicable skills that help students frame their learning into their actual lives (Ewing et al., 2021).

Glavan et al. (2022) found that historically, alternative school enrollment was part of a school-of-choice initiative that allowed students to choose where they received their education. Alternative schools have since become a dumping ground for students with behavioral issues because they do not fit into the traditional school setting or need an alternative to expulsion (Glavan et al., 2022). Although each state has its definitions of what an alternative school consists of, Welsh (2022) found that most states use behavioral infractions and consequences as the primary enrollment criteria. Because of these demographics, alternative schools focus on positive behavior interventions and seek ways to reduce negative behavior rather than punish it (McGee & Lin, 2020). The literature review and my study address both behavioral and academic forms of alternative schools.

Students who attend alternative schools are predominantly minorities or low-income youth. Welsh (2022) analyzed enrollment data from the 2014–2015 school year and found that while African American students comprised 16% of public-school enrollments nationwide, they comprised 20% of enrollments at alternative schools. Similarly, Hispanic students were 25% of total student enrollment but 37% of enrollments at alternative schools, while low-income students were 45% of total student enrollment but 54% of enrollments at alternative schools (Welsh, 2022).

While many at-risk students have found success through alternative education, Aspiranti et al. (2021) identified several weaknesses. They noted two separate lawsuits that alleged that students with disabilities were segregated from their classmates and were not given access to extracurriculars such as electives and sports (Aspiranti et al., 2021). Aspiranti et al. reported criticisms that alternative schools' watered-down curriculum does not provide rigorous educational expectations, which may hinder students' lives after high school.

Alternative schools help students who might otherwise not graduate or receive their high school diplomas. McGee and Lin (2020) analyzed elements of alternative schools to determine which factors are the most effective in helping at-risk students find academic success and personal growth. The authors found that the most important factors were planning a supportive, individualized learning environment; building social skills; addressing classroom management with stress on positive behavior enforcement; and helping to guide future behavior. Additionally, McGee and Lin concluded that supporting students through collaboration with their families was beneficial in supporting their needs.

Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

While students grappled with adjusting to virtual education during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers struggled. Teachers navigated new technologies, and many of them had never taught virtually and did not receive formal training (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). In addition to learning new technologies, teachers struggled to stay in contact with students, manage their workloads, and maintain positive relationships with

their students, all while providing quality instruction via video calls (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). According to Stelitano et al. (2020), of 6,000 teachers surveyed across the United States, 43% reported difficulties in maintaining communications with students and families, 20% reported technology concerns, and 31% struggled with providing instruction via remote learning.

Technological and communication problems were more severe in low-income districts than in affluent ones, where students struggled with disproportionate access to technology, leaving them isolated from school and peers (Easterbrook et al., 2022). Aside from issues concerning instruction, teachers also faced concerns related to their students' emotional and physical well-being. Students no longer had access to mental health services or trauma interventions (Antoni, 2021). In addition, they had to deal with household stressors such as parental unemployment and helping younger siblings with their work (Mutch & Peung, 2021).

Gap and Necessity of the Study

While research has been conducted on how teachers experienced the pandemic (Kim & Asbury, 2020) and how at-risk students were affected (Jones et al., 2021), no published research has specifically explored the experience of alternative teachers as they shifted from face-to-face to virtual education during the pandemic. The unique culture of alternative schools requires its research to be separate from research on traditional schools (McGee & Lin, 2020). This study was needed so educators and educational leaders can better understand what strategies alternative teachers used to meet the exceptional needs of their at-risk population during the worldwide quarantine.

Problem Statement

The specific research problem that was addressed through this study was that there was a lack of research on secondary alternative teachers' transformational learning experiences during their shift from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. While research had been conducted on the effects the pandemic had on at-risk students, no published article focused specifically on how the culture of alternative schools and alternative teachers was impacted by the worldwide quarantine.

There needs to be more research conducted on alternative schools compared to traditional middle and high schools. Kho and Rabovsky (2022) noted that, despite the growing number of enrollments, alternative schools were often excluded from research. Additionally, there were no published studies on the experience of alternative school teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gentles and Brown (2021) recommended additional studies to support teachers postpandemic. The specific research problem that was addressed through this study was that there was a lack of research on secondary alternative teachers' transformational learning experiences during their shift from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question

To gain insights on the experiences of alternative teachers during the pandemic, I crafted one research question that guided my interviews. My specific research question was the following:

RQ: What were the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conceptual Foundation

The conceptual foundation of this study was Glisczinski's (2007) transformative learning theory (TLT). This theory explores how a person's thoughts and actions change when confronted with an unfamiliar situation. It consists of four phases: disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action, detailed in Chapter 2. In my study, the disorienting dilemma was the COVID-19 pandemic in which quarantined students and teachers shifted from face-to-face to virtual learning.

The TLT is often used to teach adult students in the classroom, such as preservice teachers and students in medical school (Cho & Johnson, 2020). In these scenarios, the disorienting dilemma was intentionally created to force students to reevaluate preconceptions, which put the adult learners into a simulated learning environment. Only two published researchers used the TLT outside of classroom simulations. Collay (2017) used the TLT to understand how college professors learned to use virtual teaching tools. Kim et al. (2021) applied the TLT to explore how physical education teachers learned to

teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies were significant to my study as they were the only published studies that applied the TLT to actual events, which was also how I applied the theory.

I used the constructs of the TLT, such as the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action, to inform my research question and the interview protocol. Additionally, during the data analysis process, I used the names of the TLT phases as predetermined codes. Using the TLT, I was able to identify how new learning emerged from the disorienting dilemma.

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative paradigm for this study because I was exploring the perceptions and experiences of individuals during an isolated phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). I found the interpretive nature of qualitative research apt for my study as each participant's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were unique and subjective. Quantitative researchers are more concerned with objective facts and analyzing variables' relationships with one another, which was inappropriate for my study.

I chose the basic qualitative approach for my study. The aim of a basic qualitative study is to provide insights into the participant's experiences, perceptions, and interpretations (Merriam, 2009). According to Kahlke (2014), the basic qualitative design is also appropriate for answering fundamental questions without using multiple rounds of interviews and a relatively small number of participants, which in my case was around 12–15 people. This basic qualitative research design fit my study as I explored how

alternative teachers' perceptions and interpretations of the pandemic shifted their practices.

During the interview process, I used both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding occurs when the researcher has predetermined codes to classify information, whereas in inductive coding, researchers use the data found in interviews to create new codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2016). The predetermined codes in my study were based on phases of the TLT and consisted of the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action. After the interviews, I reviewed the data for emergent themes. According to Williams and Moser (2019), it is essential to recognize themes and code data in qualitative interviews so that the research can form meaning. I hand coded the data using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I started by using open coding to identify broad concepts, followed by axial coding, in which I organized and refined the emergent themes into broader categories (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Definitions

The following terms and phrases are found throughout this study and in the alternative education setting:

Alternative school/education: A public institution used to educate students who have not found success in traditional schools due to either behavior and/or academic struggles (Glavan et al., 2022).

At-risk students: Youths who are seen as likely to experience academic failure, truancy, substance abuse, early pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, and early school dropout (Free, 2017).

COVID-19 pandemic: An ongoing global pandemic that has killed nearly 6.7 million people to date, forcing the worldwide closure of schools and businesses (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Social-emotional learning (SEL): The process of developing self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills necessary to understand emotions, achieve goals, and maintain positive relationships (Walker, 2023).

Transformative learning theory: A learning theory originated by Mezirow (1978) and adapted by Glisczinski (2007), which describes the process an adult learner undergoes when faced with a disorienting dilemma.

Virtual school/learning/education: A system of learning in which the student accesses coursework via the internet rather than attending an in-person institution (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

Assumptions

In research, assumptions are ideas and statements presumed to be accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first assumption of this study was that all participants would be truthful and forthcoming with all their experiences in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Any deception on the part of the participant could have threatened the validity of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As such, I assumed that each participant would be honest and open. Another assumption was that my participant pool would include a range of teachers who were representative of the various cultures and demographics of the region based on the random sampling technique. A final assumption

was that I, as the researcher, would remain impartial to the results of my study regardless of the outcome.

Scope and Delimitations

I only looked at alternative teachers located in the southeast region of the United States. I chose to focus on alternative teachers because the ways they taught and connected with their students differed greatly from teachers in traditional schools and it was important to explore how these teachers experienced the transition to virtual teaching.

I focused on the southeast region of the United States because of the diversity of this population. My participants were from various environments and cultures, which aided in the transferability of my study. According to Maxwell (2020), a study has transferability when data represent the larger population. The location that I used for my study contained a variety of urban, suburban, and rural areas, which helped to give data representative of a wide range of demographics. In my study, I only explored the transition from traditional to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore did not explore how virtual education was used prior to the pandemic.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which was 12 participants. According to Simon and Goes (2013), basic qualitative studies use small numbers of participants that may not reflect the perspectives of the larger population. Additionally, the study was focused on the southern Atlantic area of the United States. Although this

area includes a variety of cultures and demographics, it may not be generalizable to the overall population of the United States or other countries.

One form of bias that could occur is confirmation bias, which occurs when the researcher focuses only on data that support their desired results (Chan et al., 2013). To avoid this bias, I ensured that each aspect of the data was reviewed, including information that might seem insignificant. Furthermore, I engaged in reflexive journaling and transcript checking to ensure that the data were accurate.

Significance

My study was significant in that it may bring about positive social change for alternative teachers and the population they teach. Findings from this study may inform educators and educational leaders on strategies to reach at-risk students enrolled at alternative schools when virtual instruction is necessary, such as in times of natural disasters or emergencies. Recent literature shows that alternative teachers use different strategies than traditional school teachers (McGee & Lin, 2020; Modesto, 2018). Understanding how alternative teachers' methods can be applied virtually has the potential to impact how teachers engage and support their students when face-to-face learning is not possible.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I identified the phenomenon of interest, the COVID-19 pandemic, and identified the gap in the research regarding alternative teachers' experiences in transitioning from face-to-face to virtual learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative

study was to understand the perceptions and experiences of alternative teachers during the quarantine and whether these adjustments led to transformative learning experiences.

In Chapter 2, I explain the tenets of the TLT and discuss its application in recent research. Additionally, I review recent literature relating to the themes of at-risk students, alternative schools, and education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The scholarly articles in the literature review support the need for my research and give context to my study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic that shut down schools around the world forced teachers to reevaluate the ways in which they teach students. This shift to virtual instruction stimulated innovation in education (Zhao & Watterson, 2021) and placed the teacher into the role of the learner, as many were unprepared for or inexperienced with virtual instruction (Hart, 2020). The unexpected shift to virtual education caused teachers to reexamine their instruction and challenged their prior assumptions about education practices, including their use of technology (Hart, 2020; Spencer, 2020). However, Trust and Whalen (2021) found that teachers were inadequately prepared to implement technology and many educators reported that feeling inadequate with technology was the most significant challenge in supporting their students. Although research has been conducted on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on traditional schools (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021), there is a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of secondary alternative schoolteachers.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ohrt et al. (2020) showed that secondary alternative teachers successfully used face-to-face instruction and interventions to support their at-risk students academically. As schools resume face-to-face instruction, Zhao and Watterson (2021) recommended that teachers refocus their strategies to include pandemic adaptations that can help their students thrive in the age of technology and globalization. The specific research problem that was addressed through this study is that there is a lack of research on secondary alternative teachers' transformational learning experiences during their shift from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the literature review in this section, I focus on two main groups: secondary at-risk students and secondary alternative schoolteachers. Within the category of at-risk students, I focus on their experiences at alternative schools, the benefits and pitfalls of virtual learning, and the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on their coursework. In the literature, I provide a review of the experiences of secondary teachers working in alternative schools, as well as the struggles of teachers to reach at-risk students during the pandemic.

The following databases were used to find literature: EBSCO, ERIC, Education Source, SAGE Journals, and Taylor and Francis Online. Keywords included *at-risk students OR at-risk youth, minority students, alternative teachers OR alternative educators, alternative schools OR alternative programs OR alternative education, secondary OR grades 9-12 OR 9 grade OR 10 grade OR 11 grade OR 12 grade, COVID-19 OR Corona Virus OR pandemic, virtual school OR virtual education or virtual learning OR online learning OR distance education, experiences OR perceptions*, and *transformative learning theory OR transformative learning.*

Conceptual Framework

The TLT, an adult learning theory initially described by Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1997) and adapted by Herbers (1998) and Glisczinski (2007), was the conceptual

framework for this study. The TLT is a process that occurs when an adult encounters an unexpected event, referred to as a *disorienting dilemma* (Mezirow, 1991). This disorienting dilemma sets off a course of events Mezirow classified these events into 10 phases. During these 10 phases, the adult learners examine and reflect on their previous assumptions, explore alternatives and new ideas, plan a new course of action based on further information and insights, and eventually reintegrate their new perspectives into the disorienting situation. Mezirow (1991) stressed the importance of critical reflection and critical discourse in the process of transformative experiences. The transformation that occurs in the TLT shapes the frame of reference, allowing the adult learner a heightened sense of the world free from previous assumptions and expectations.

TLT Background

Mezirow (1978) based the TLT on the constructivist theory, which indicates that adults use past experiences as a frame of reference in building new knowledge (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow conceived the TLT during a qualitative study of 83 women who reentered the classroom after an extended absence. Mezirow was interested in learning what factors facilitated or impeded the women's postsecondary experiences. Mezirow concluded that the respondents underwent personal transformations and developed his 10 phases based on their experiences. Mezirow (1997) stressed two premises: the learners are (a) adults and (b) capable of rational thought and discourse.

Several additional theories helped inform Mezirow's (1978) theory. Mezirow used Kuhn's (1962) paradigm theory, which is a general theory that helps provide a framework for other scientists' theories, as a basis for the concept of the frame of

reference in the TLT. Freire's (1970) theory of conscientization also informed Mezirow's theory. Freire defined conscientization, or critical consciousness, as developing a critical awareness of social and political contradictions with the purpose of acting against oppression. Freire explained that with the development of critical consciousness, the individual can merge critical thought with action to affect change. This process informed the development of Mezirow's ideas of the disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, and critical discourse (Kitchenham, 2008). The last theory that helped inform Mezirow's TLT was Habermas's (1971) domains of learning. Habermas identified three domains of learning:

- the technical, which is learning specific to a singular task
- the practical, which is understanding how to apply learning to different domains
- the emancipatory, which is introspective learning that reflects upon the nature of the learning and its implications (Kitchenham, 2008).

The transformation that occurs when progressing through these three domains encompasses the 10 phases of the TLT (Kitchenham, 2008).

Glisczinski's Adaptation of the TLT

Of the many adaptations of the work of Mezirow, Glisczinski's (2007) TLT was the most applicable framework for this research study due to the concise nature of Glisczinski's adaptations. Whereas Mezirow described the events throughout an 11-phase process, Glisczinski's model consists of four quadrants, which was rooted in a

dissertation by Herbers (1998) and used in a mixed-methods investigation of the transformative learning experiences of preservice teachers.

According to Glisczinski (2007), higher education is adept at producing obedient citizens equipped with the basic skills to function in society but not with the critical thinking skills to create advancements and generate new ideas. When a learner undergoes cognitive dissonance, they begin by examining their habits of mind—the general ways in which they are predisposed to interpret the meaning of their experiences (Glisczinski, 2007). Glisczinski found that the transition from *knowledge* to *understanding* has the power to foster proactive thinking and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints, which can, in turn, transform one's worldview. Glisczinski posited that the production of new ideas, rather than the regurgitation of traditions, is necessary to move society forward and create social change. In short, transformative education is key to achieving a more inclusive, just, and democratic society (Glisczinski, 2007). Each step taken by the learner brings them into a new quadrant.

Quadrant I: Disorienting Dilemma

In Quadrant I, an unexpected event or problem, referred to as a disorienting dilemma, causes the subject to reevaluate their thoughts and actions. The encounter of this obstacle hinders the subject from acting normally, and they must find a different way of contending with the problem. According to Glisczinski (2007), transformative experiences begin when the subject's typical reactions, including beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and reactions, are an insufficient match for their current circumstances. Thus, the central question the subject might ask themselves is "What do I do now?"

Quadrant II: Critical Reflection

Quadrant II occurs when the subject reexamines their own beliefs and seeks to identify the basis of their preexisting assumptions surrounding their cognitive dissonance. Reflecting on their existing premises, the learners work to incorporate new knowledge and adjust their meaning schemes (Glisczinski, 2007). This critical reflection involves analyzing the gap between the everyday experience and the learners' ideal outcome of the situation; according to Glisczinski (2007), is imperative in the process of transformative learning. It enables individuals to make sense of their new situation through reevaluation. The central question of this quadrant is "Why do I think this?"

Quadrant III: Rational Dialogue

Quadrant III is called rational dialogue and occurs when the subject engages in discourse with others. The purpose of this discourse is to assess the reasoning presented by alternative interpretations and critically examine the evidence, arguments, and points of view. Glisczinski (2007) stated that the discourse leads the subject to explore new concepts and practices. People engaged in rational dialogue seek to read, discuss, listen, and then read more to reconceptualize their assumptions and actions (Glisczinski, 2007). They also engage in premise reflection, in which they seek to understand and analyze the importance of considering certain assumptions and values (Glisczinski, 2007).

Quadrant IV: Action

In the final quadrant, the subject's behavior changes based on their critical reflection, rational discourse, the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and the construction of knowledge. Those who fully experience the transformative learning cycle

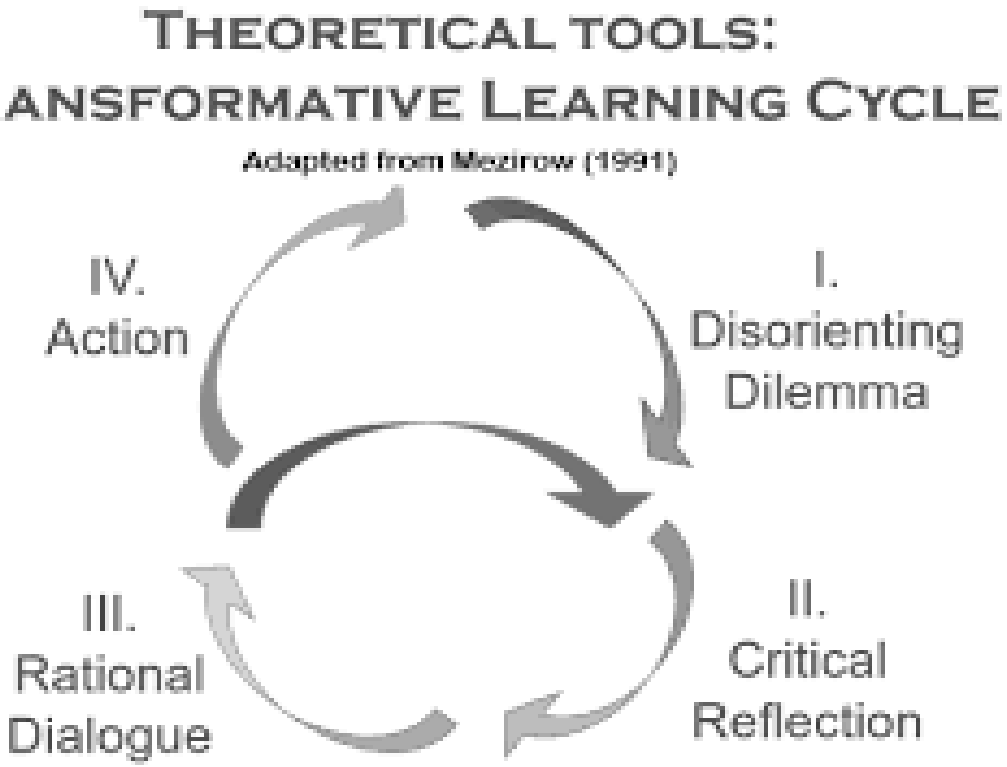
can better engage in knowledge construction and critical thinking when faced with new experiences (Glisczinski, 2007). Additionally, they seek meaning in all they do and feel free from oppressive thinking (Glisczinski, 2007).

The Transformative Learning Cycle Illustrated

Johnson and Olanoff (2020) described how mathematics teacher educators applied the TLT to the instruction of preservice math teachers to help them better understand the content they would be teaching. They explained that incorporating disorienting dilemmas into their instruction forced the preservice teachers to engage in critical reflection, discourse, and connections between their previous beliefs and their new knowledge. They created a visual aid (Figure 1) that shows the four quadrants of the transformative learning cycle: disorienting dilemma, critical reflection, rational dialogue, and action. The transformative learning process cycles through the quadrants, as indicated by the arrows, until the educator determines the best course of action and implements their transformed plan.

Figure 1

Theoretical Tools: Transformative Learning Cycle



Note: From "Using Transformative Learning Theory to Help Prospective Teachers Learn Mathematics They Already Know," by K. Johnson and D. Olanoff, 2020, *The Mathematics Enthusiast, 17*(2), 725–769 (https://doi.org/10.54870/1551-3440.1502). Copyright 2020 by K. Johnson and D. Olanoff. Reprinted with permission.

Glisczinski's Application of the TLT

Glisczinski (2007) conducted a mixed-methods study of 153 preservice teachers regarding their personal experiences with the TLT. Glisczinski divided the TLT into four quadrants to determine which elements preservice teachers experienced. He found that 73% of respondents had experienced a disorienting dilemma (Quadrant I), 43% had

engaged in critical reflection (Quadrant II), 47% had engaged in rational discourse (Quadrant III), and 35% had changed their behavior because of their critical reflection and rational discourse (Quadrant IV). Based on these results, Glisczinski concluded that the instrumental learning that is so prevalent in education comes at the cost of expansive learning experiences and that it impedes one's ability to have transformational experiences. Glisczinski's conclusion was particularly relevant to this study as the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic required expansive learning experiences. The pandemic's disorienting dilemma had prevented educators from relying on what was done in the past and necessitated innovative, transformative thinking.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

In this section, I review the recent literature related to key concepts within my study. First, I discuss how recent researchers have applied the conceptual framework. Then, I review research related to key concepts within my study. The topics discussed are the experiences of at-risk students, at-risk students' experiences in online coursework, teachers' experiences at alternative schools, at-risk students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Application of the Transformative Learning Theory in Research Studies

The researchers who applied the TLT in teacher education and professional development found that participants who engaged in transformational learning experienced advanced critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1978). Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1978) also noted that when critical consciousness occurred, the learner became more engaged in critical reflection and developed a more meaningful

understanding. I organized the articles in this section into two categories: professional development or training seminars in which the researcher presented the teacher with a staged disorienting dilemma and practicing teachers who experienced real-life disorienting dilemmas in the classroom.

Professional Development and the TLT

Forte and Blouin (2016) used the TLT as the lens to investigate and train in-service teachers attending a professional development seminar. In this qualitative study, they interviewed 24 K–12 teachers enrolled in online graduate-level courses. The authors examined the transformational learning experiences surrounding sociocultural issues during virtual professional development courses. Forte and Blouin observed that each participant experienced transformational changes that led to positive outcomes for both the teachers and their students. For example, the teachers learned strategies that could create deeper content understanding for students and developed techniques such as celebrating small successes in the classroom. However, Forte and Blouin found that for transformative learning to occur, the learner must be open to change and the context must be right, and they noted that outside factors play a role in any transformation.

A professional development seminar was also the setting for Meijer et al.'s (2017) qualitative study, in which the researchers sought to explore strategies to incite transformative learning experiences in practicing teachers. During the first stage, Meijer et al. worked with five veteran teachers to create a professional development program to stimulate transformative learning experiences in practicing teachers. In the second phase, they enlisted 20 experienced educators to participate in the program, which took place

over 9 months. The authors found that transformative learning occurred after in-depth group discussions and the sharing of theories, resulting in a shared vision. However, despite the educators' transformative changes in their beliefs and intentions, Meijer et al. observed no behavioral changes in the participants, a step that is crucial in experiencing transformative learning (Glisczinski, 2007). Additionally, the length of Meijer et al.'s study (i.e., 9 months) allowed the authors to observe participants' behavioral changes over time, unlike Forte and Blouin, who conducted a short-term study and therefore could only observe immediate effects.

Real-Life Experiences with TLT in the Classroom

Cho and Johnson (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine the transformative learning experiences of preservice teachers when placed in an unfamiliar learning environment. In this study, 18 preservice teachers engaged in a disorienting dilemma field experience at an elementary school that serviced foreign-language speakers learning English. The authors found that incorporating the disorienting dilemma helped preservice teachers develop critical reflection skills and confront their frames of reference in transformative learning. Furthermore, the developing relationships were crucial in the transformative process as the preservice teachers engaged in critical reflection and dialogue with their mentors. Unlike Forte and Blouin's hypothetical disorienting dilemma, the transformative learning in Cho and Johnson's study occurred because the researchers presented their participants with a disorienting dilemma in an authentic classroom environment.

Collay (2017) applied the TLT to understand how faculty at a university responded to the demands of switching from traditional to virtual education. In this case study, they interviewed eight core faculty members using transformational concepts to inform the research questions and interview protocol. Collay found that their participants, who held dual roles of adult learners and teachers, were removed from their comfort zones when faced with teaching virtually. Because of this activating event, each participant reported changing how they perceived their roles as teachers, questioning their experiences, and being open to new viewpoints. Collay also found the participants sought opportunities to engage in critical reflection and discourse, which are essential in the transformative learning process (Glisczinski, 2007).

Kim et al. (2021) applied the TLT to understand the experiences of physical education (PE) teachers who shifted to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this qualitative study, the authors interviewed eight PE teachers to examine their experiences and perceptions. They found that the participants felt negatively toward the shift to the virtual classroom and reported feeling overwhelmed due to a lack of technological experiences and knowledge and that they struggled to engage their students in online activities. However, Kim et al. found that the participants did experience transformative learning due to the shift to online instructions, with participants undergoing personal and professional development opportunities that resulted in technological and pedagogical skill advances. Furthermore, Kim et al. showed that transformative learning could occur even when the participants were not open to change,

contrasting Forte and Blouin's findings that transformative learning could only happen if the learners were open to change.

Summary of the Use of TLT in Education

Researchers have used the TLT to explore the transformative experiences of teachers in two ways: by simulating disorienting dilemmas in professional development seminars and by studying authentic experiences of teachers through the lens of the TLT. In both scenarios, the disorienting dilemma provoked participants to reevaluate their ideas and assumptions, resulting in varying transformative experiences. The professional development seminars (Meijer et al., 2017) helped teachers understand how incorporating a disorienting dilemma could rewire how they process and react to situations. Furthermore, the real-life scenarios (Cho & Johnson, 2020; Kim et al., 2021) evidenced how authentic experiences created disorienting dilemmas that forced the teachers to explore new ways of thinking.

Meijer et al. (2017) and Cho and Johnson's (2020) studies occurred over the course of a year, allowing investigation of the long-term effects of the transformative learning process. However, Cho and Johnson (2020) and Meijer et al. (2017) showed contrasting results. Meijer et al. found that teachers in their seminar reported transformative changes in their beliefs and intentions but noted no transformative changes in their behavior. In contrast, Cho and Johnson found that the preservice teachers in the authentic classroom environment experienced all levels of the transformative learning process. Additional research is needed to understand whether the study's setting affected the participants' transformative behavior.

In multiple studies (Cho & Johnson, 2020; Meijer et al., 2017), the researchers presented the participants with a disorienting dilemma to observe the teachers' responses as they worked through transformative learning. In applying the disorienting dilemma, the researchers observed each stage of the transformative process and collected data throughout. In contrast, Collay (2017) and Kim et al. (2021) conducted their studies with teachers after they experienced an authentic disorienting dilemma. Because of this difference, the researchers did not observe the participants as they worked through the stages of transformative learning. Instead, Collay and Kim et al. conducted one-on-one interviews with teachers to understand their perceptions of the disorienting events and the transformative shifts in their thinking, discourse, and behavior. In addition, these real-life disorienting dilemmas also allowed researchers to observe participants' applied behavior beyond a set scenario and the impact on their professional lives.

At-Risk Students' Experience in Middle and Secondary Alternative Schools

At-risk students often struggle to succeed in traditional middle and high schools and transfer to alternative schools. Students leave their traditional schools for reasons such as attrition (McGee & Lin, 2020), disengagement (Ewing et al., 2021), academic and behavioral issues (Hofer et al., 2020), and incarceration (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). According to Aspiranti et al. (2021), students who exhibit aggression, off-task behavior, and defiance are more likely to fall behind academically. Additionally, at-risk youth often struggle to transition to adulthood due to their lack of family support and lack of resources (Sulimani-Aidan, 2019). As educators seek to improve the experience of at-risk students in alternative programs, it is first necessary to understand why the students

struggled at their traditional schools. The researchers within this theme interviewed at-risk students to understand their experiences and how alternative schools provided a platform for their success.

Attrition

McGee and Lin (2020) and Flores and Brown (2019) conducted qualitative studies to understand why at-risk students dropped out of their traditional high schools and re-enrolled in alternative schools. McGee and Lin (2020) conducted semistructured interviews with eight current and eight former secondary alternative students, while Flores and Brown (2019) interviewed ten students (five graduates and five dropouts), three teachers, and two administrators. The participants in McGee and Lin's (2020) study said that traditional high schools had too many distractions and that the large crowds interfered with their ability to receive one-on-one support. Others reported being frustrated with the large workload and the expectations for self-discipline. Several participants said the alternative schools had a different attitude toward discipline, preferring to understand and counsel the behavior rather than punish it. Flores and Brown's (2019) participants reported feeling pushed out of their traditional high schools by school staff and that repeated negative encounters caused them to disengage from the school. Both McGee and Lin (2020) and Flores and Brown (2019) found that one-on-one attention and a sense of belongingness were prevalent at the alternative schools. These traits allowed at-risk students to gain a sense of autonomy and the persistence to succeed.

Modesto's (2018) qualitative study focused on the educational experiences of teen mothers enrolled in alternative schools. The researcher found three themes emerged, two

of which align closely with the conclusions of other studies regarding at-risk students in alternative schools. The first theme that emerged was that alternative schools provided the students with nonacademic assistance such as at-home instruction, daycare, transportation, and material incentives such as diapers, highchairs, books, and other childcare essentials. The next theme that emerged was the ability to graduate early, like Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al.'s (2016) conclusion that students could earn credits quicker than their peers. The final theme that emerged from Modesto's study involved the supportive learning environment provided by the alternative school. The participants reported feeling supported by the teachers at the schools, a prevalent theme across the reviewed studies (Ewing et al., 2021).

Kamrath (2019) conducted a case study at an evening alternative school in an urban neighborhood to understand how this program aided at-risk students in achieving high school diplomas. The author interviewed 11 former and current students and 10 staff members. Like Modesto's (2018) study, Kamrath's participants revealed the supportive environment experienced by faculty and students in alternative schools (Ewing et al., 2021). Additionally, Kamrath concluded that staff members had a personal stake in their students' success and that this personalized care helped students regain self-confidence.

Disengagement

Chronic absenteeism led to disengagement from traditional high schools (Flores & Brown, 2019). Ewing et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study at an urban alternative school to understand what factors led to chronic absenteeism and the alternative school's administrative response. They analyzed their findings into two categories: events outside

and inside the school's control. Certain factors were out of the school's control, which aligned with Flores and Brown's findings: safe, stable housing and reliable transportation. Factors within the school's control included a sense of belonging, a flexible schedule, and support for other services, including bus cards, personal items, and counseling. At-risk students who knew their school resources included a safe environment to seek help and emotional support were less likely to experience chronic absenteeism, which Flores and Brown (2019) also reported. As McGee and Lin (2020) found, personal support and the small teacher-student ratio at alternative schools provided students with academic support and social and emotional support that helped combat chronic absenteeism.

Academic and Behavioral Improvement

Welsh (2022) examined an urban school district to determine alternate disciplinary consequences to expulsion and which demographics faced the most severe punishments for infractions. This mixed-methods study found that African American male students received the harshest punishments. While African American students comprised 50% of the district, they represented 80% of the alternative school population. According to Welsh, this disproportional rate illustrates the extent to which African American students are disciplined over their European American peers. Welsh also found that the most common infractions that led to alternative school placement involved possession of drugs or weapons and that attendance-related infractions rarely resulted in expulsion.

Hofer et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study at two alternative schools in Canada, aiming to understand the correlation between self-determination and academic success. The participants in these programs, aged 15 to 19, reported previous experiences with learning disabilities, mental health disorders, substance abuse problems, and a lack of positive role models. However, the participants reported that the schools maintained high but achievable standards that encouraged students' self-esteem. Additionally, the participants' reflections on their experiences at these alternative schools echoed previous findings: they were given autonomy in their lessons, leading to a sense of competency (Flores & Brown, 2019); the respect among students and staff led to a reduction in stress (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020), as did the more casual environment of the alternative school, which included couches and a kitchen; and the caring support of the staff led to improved academic persistence (Ewing et al., 2021; McGee & Lin, 2020).

Aside from feelings of support and individualized care (Ewing et al., 2021; Hofer et al., 2020), alternative schools helped students academically and behaviorally. Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al. (2016) investigated how alternative schools affected students' academic and behavioral success. The authors conducted a quasi-experimental quantitative study to determine alternative schools' effects on academic success in which they interviewed 5,863 high school students: 5,031 from traditional high schools and 832 from academic remediation-focused alternative schools. Comparisons of the data indicated significantly more absenteeism at the alternative school than at traditional schools, but learners could earn more credits per semester at the alternative school. Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al. (2016) concluded that placement in an alternative school

"is associated with stronger [academic] performance, indicating schools are providing students with support that boosts their performance in this most basic and critical way" (p. 75). Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al.'s (2016) results, paired with the findings of Ewing et al. (2021), Flores and Brown (2019), and McGee and Lin (2020), concluded that the individualized care and support afforded to alternative school students leads to success for at-risk students.

In a semiexperimental quantitative study, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigan, et al. (2016) studied the effects of behavioral-focused alternative schools on at-risk students. As McGee and Lin (2020) found, Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigan, et al. (2016) reported that the alternative school teachers and administrators had a more positive, constructive attitude toward discipline, which focused on correcting unwanted behavior. Wilkerson, Afacan, Perzigan, et al. (2016) found that behavioral-focused alternative school students earned fewer credits per semester than their peers at a traditional high school. However, whether in the alternative or the traditional school, all participants earned fewer credits per semester than necessary to graduate in 4 years. The implications of these findings suggested that outside factors may be responsible for the low-performing statistics across the district.

Glavan et al. (2022) interviewed four alternative school students to determine their experiences prior to and during placement at the alternative school. The participants reported struggling academically and engaging in disruptive, violent behavior at their traditional schools. As in Ewing et al.'s (2021) study, the student participants were able to form positive relationships with their teachers and felt the alternative school provided a

caring atmosphere that met their social, emotional, and educational needs (McGee & Lin, 2020). While the students felt the alternative school positively impacted their lives, Glavan et al. (2022) found that the program's academic rigor could be increased, as half of the participants found themselves unemployed nine months after graduation.

Afacan and Wilkerson (2019) conducted a quantitative study in which they analyzed data from 21,162 students to identify characteristics of middle school alternative students and to analyze the academic and behavioral outcomes of these students versus their traditional school peers. Like Welsh (2022), Afacan and Wilkerson (2019) identified that most of the students in the alternative schools were male (67%) and African American (91.4%), and many received special education services. They also found that the students attending alternative middle schools displayed significantly lower reading levels than their peers. However, the difference in behavioral infractions between the two groups was not statistically significant.

Engaging Incarcerated/Previously Incarcerated Youth

The attributes of at-risk students have several factors in common with incarcerated youth, such as unstable home life, alienation from society, and minority status (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). Because of these similarities, understanding the experiences of educating incarcerated youths is relevant to this study. Additionally, the strategies used in these studies may be relevant in educating at-risk youths.

Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) conducted a qualitative study to explore how alternative education successfully impacted previously incarcerated youths in Australia. The authors interviewed 20 youths between the ages of 11 and 22 enrolled in an

alternative education program called Out Teach. Out Teach provided former inmates with the necessary skills and confidence to advance their education or gain employment. The participants reported that their success was due to the respect and lasting bond formed between the instructor and the student, similarly echoed by others (Flores & Brown, 2019). While Reimer and Pangrazio's focus was on incarcerated youth rather than at-risk youth, their findings indicated that the themes of care and innovation were essential in helping both groups of youths find success.

Innovation is an essential factor in meeting the needs of at-risk and previously incarcerated youth. In the case of Out Touch, teachers tailored the curriculum to individual student needs. Students received reading material that met their interests, such as car magazines rather than textbooks. Students learned to write resumes, apply for housing, and navigate the legal system, 21st-century skills not taught in mainstream secondary schools. The unusual locale of the program, in the back of a van, also proved to be an asset, as it removed the negative classroom connotation and associated social pressures. Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) found that Out Teach's unique structure gave students the skills and confidence to reengage with society and pursue their futures.

Lea et al. (2019) focused their qualitative study on the educational experiences of formerly incarcerated young African American males. Through observations and interviews with three faculty members and eight students, Lea et al. found that arts-based programming within an alternative school provided culturally relevant and meaningful learning opportunities. For instance, one participant reported struggling with algebra but strengthened his math skills by learning to make beats for a rapper friend using recording

software. Each of the participants reported exposure to violent crimes as children and that the arts-focused curriculum gave them a healthy emotional outlet for their past trauma. As with Reimer and Pangrazio's (2020) study, the students benefitted from the innovative curriculum.

Basford et al. (2020) interviewed 19 participants, including students and faculty members at an alternative school in Minnesota to determine how this school helped at-risk students escape the school-to-prison pipeline. Many students at this school had been previously incarcerated or had already dropped out of school for six months or more. Like Lea et al.'s (2019) results, Basford et al. found that this alternative school, which provided access to a recording studio, incorporated elements of hip-hop and the recording arts into its curriculum to motivate and inspire students to engage in some form of learning. Additionally, the authors found that the school specifically hired teachers who could connect with the students and allowed students to provide feedback on hiring new staff. Finally, Basford et al. found that the school provided a safe place for students to survive and thrive by meeting their physiological, safety, and belonging needs. In Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) and Basford et al. (2020), the alternative schools provided students an environment of caring and respect.

Conclusions on the Experience of At-Risk Students in Alternative Schools

There were common attributes across the alternative schools discussed in this literature review: individualized care, a personalized education plan, and student autonomy (Hofer et al., 2020). Students enrolled in alternative schools felt failed by their traditional schools for a plethora of reasons: unsympathetic administrators (Flores &

Brown, 2019); large, distracting class sizes that did not allow for one-on-one mentoring (McGee & Lin, 2020); and uncompromising workloads (Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al., 2016).

Alternative schools, however, afforded the at-risk students an emotionally safe environment that allowed them the autonomy to work at their own pace and recover credits while receiving one-on-one support from teachers (Modesto, 2018; Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). At-risk students across these studies also reported that the alternative schools provided students with a less stressful environment than traditional schools. For example, Hofer et al. (2020) and Reimer and Pangrazio (2020) found that the laid-back atmosphere helped reduce students' stress. Additionally, innovative curriculums, such as those found by Lea et al. (2019) and Basford et al. (2020) allowed students to learn in nontraditional ways and express themselves creatively.

Alternative schools are crucial to the success of at-risk students as they can offer them the hope and perseverance to succeed that they lost at their traditional schools and a voice to reflect on their experiences. As Flores and Brown (2019) noted, many at-risk students felt administrators and faculty pushed them out of their traditional schools, which led to feelings of alienation and isolation. Those who had previous arrests found it difficult to reengage with their communities (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). The alternative programs provided opportunities for at-risk or previously incarcerated students to discover their voices and reengage their peers, helping them find success (Ewing et al., 2021; Flores & Brown, 2019).

At-Risk Students' Experiences in Online Coursework

While no research articles relate directly to alternative schools' use of online virtual schools to assist their students, research exists on at-risk students' experiences in online classes. According to Wang et al. (2022), while online enrollment is at an all-time high, so are failure and attrition, with only 5-15% enrolled in self-paced online learning (SPOL) finding academic success. Previous findings suggested that the high failure rates in online education were due to a lack of academic support (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019) and formative feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). In response, Yan (2020) recommended focusing studies on facilitating meaningful and personal feedback and support, enhancing social interactions, offering academic interventions, and increasing learning awareness. This section will discuss research studies conducted on the experiences of at-risk and minority students enrolled in initial credit and credit recovery courses online and the strategies and pitfalls of SPOL courses.

Heppen et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the benefits and challenges of recovering course credits in a SPOL course. A total of 1,224 9th grade students enrolled in an online Algebra 1 credit recovery course participated in a survey. The authors found that students struggled more in online credit recovery courses than in traditional face-to-face. Additionally, the support systems in the online course needed to be improved to help struggling students find success. Heppen et al.'s findings support the conclusion that at-risk students benefit from one-on-one teacher support, as found by Ewing et al. (2021), Flores and Brown (2019), Reimer and Pangrazio (2020), and

Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al. (2016). Without personalized support, at-risk students struggled and failed in online classes.

Nourse (2019) also conducted a quantitative study to determine which factors lead to success for students taking credit recovery courses online. The author surveyed 347 high school students enrolled in SPOL credit recovery courses. Norse reported that the more positive social interactions students have at school, the better they perform in online coursework. This conclusion supported the findings of Ewing et al. (2021) and Flores and Brown (2019), who concluded that alternative schools provided at-risk students with a caring environment, often not found at traditional schools. Additionally, Nourse's findings align with Heppen et al.'s (2017) conclusions that virtual support alone is insufficient to foster success in at-risk students.

Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study in which they conducted semistructured interviews with 40 minority students to determine what factors help and hinder their success in SPOL courses. The participants reported that the online classroom allowed them the time and space to think over their responses to questions and construct knowledge rather than just being passive receivers of knowledge. Additionally, they reported that the online environment made them feel more comfortable asking questions in class and communicating with their teachers. However, like Heppen et al. (2017) and Nourse (2019), Kumi-Yeboah found that the lack of social presence from both teachers and peers hindered the learning environment for at-risk students.

Barnett (2016) conducted interviews with seven at-risk students who completed online coursework to determine how they perceived care and noncare as components of

their success. The participants reported falling behind in their face-to-face coursework because of feelings of noncare at the traditional schools. They also noted that taking asynchronous online courses without readily available teachers made their experiences more disconnected, another example of noncare that caused frustration for students. Additionally, the distance-based nature of the SPOL course made the participants feel forgotten by the school community. These findings align with Nourse's (2019) conclusions that positive support helps students in online classes, with Barnett concluding that teacher interactions are essential in online coursework.

Darling-Aduana (2019) conducted a quantitative study to determine the effects online learning has on the behavioral engagement of at-risk students. After reviewing the data of 40,000 students nationwide, Darling-Aduana found that students enrolled in online coursework had improved attendance and could complete coursework quicker than in traditional courses. However, unlike the qualitative studies conducted by Barnett (2016), Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018), and Nourse (2019), Darling-Aduana's quantitative study looked only at hours of logged activity and productivity rather than the students' experiences and perceptions. These results indicate that online coursework benefits at-risk students but does not explain which factors led to their success.

Conclusions on At-Risk Students in Online Coursework

The findings regarding the experiences of at-risk students in online coursework indicated that at-risk students could find success in online coursework if certain conditions exist. First, online coursework allowed students to learn at their own pace (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018) and to move through the courses faster than traditional

schools (Darling-Aduana, 2019). The ability to complete coursework quickly and at their own pace benefited at-risk students, many of whom had chronic absenteeism that prevented them from maintaining their grades (Ewing et al., 2021).

Conversely, the asynchronous nature of online classes resulted in students feeling disconnected and forgotten (Barnett, 2016; Nourse, 2019). Additionally, the asynchronous nature of online courses led to students feeling unsupported due to the absence of real-time connections (Heppen et al., 2017). Therefore, for online classes to successfully help at-risk students, learners must feel connected to the school environment and supported by mentors who have an active interest in their lives.

Teachers' Experiences at Secondary Alternative Schools

Despite the roughly 11,000 alternative schools across the United States, little research exists on the experiences of alternative school teachers (Jordan et al., 2017). As there are limited articles detailing the experience of alternative school teachers, I also included articles from foreign countries such as Australia, Canada, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, which operate in the same structure and serve the same population of at-risk students as in the United States. It is necessary to examine secondary alternative teachers apart from their traditional compatriots due to the unique nature of the programs, the smaller class sizes consisting primarily of at-risk or alienated students, and the student-centric focus of the curriculum (Free, 2017).

Jordan et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study to determine how professionals at alternative schools collaborated to serve their marginalized student populations and how they envisioned their purposes as alternative educators. They analyzed 26 teachers,

administrators, and school nurses employed at alternative schools through focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Jordan et al. identified four main themes: caring as purpose, hope, empowering citizens, and barriers to mentally healthy schools (p. 266). As echoed by Ewing et al. (2021), the students' perception of care led to the persistence to succeed and the ability to overcome obstacles. The participants also reported the significance of hope provided to these students, many of whom struggled and did not believe they would graduate from high school. Jordan et al. found that these feelings of hopelessness often stemmed from outside factors (such as poverty or unstable housing) or from years in overcrowded public schools where at-risk students reported feelings of isolation and apathy from administrators and teachers. Additionally, the stigma of an alternative school, which Jordan et al. note is often seen as a step away from juvenile detention centers, was a barrier to students' success in these institutions and created feelings of hopelessness. However, despite these barriers, the participants' overall message was one of hope and individualized care (Jordan et al., 2017).

Like Jordan et al. (2017), Duke and Tenuto (2020) emphasized the importance of collaboration among faculty and staff to support the needs of alternative school students. Duke and Tenuto (2020) interviewed eight alternative school administrators to determine successful strategies to engage their students. The authors' results echoed the findings of others, stressing the creation of a positive school culture (Ewing et al., 2021), setting high standards for their students (Hofer et al., 2020), and hiring teachers willing to take risks and trying new approaches in the classroom (Reimer & Pangrazio, 2020). Additionally, Duke and Tenuto (2020) found that many administrators welcomed students into

decision-making processes, which allowed students to feel more connected with the school.

Free (2017) conducted a qualitative study to determine what the teachers at alternative schools regarded as the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. Free conducted in-depth interviews with 23 staff members at an alternative school for 133 at-risk students in 6^{th}-10^{th} grades. Free identified the themes of individualized care and a supportive environment, a common theme across alternative school literature. The teacher-participants in this study reported that creating a culture of care was not always beneficial, leading to inconsistent discipline practices. While staff members felt the school was an emotionally safe place for the students, 19 of the 23 teachers interviewed (83%) discordantly reported that the school was a physically dangerous environment. As discussed in Chapter 1, alternative schools were regarded as dumping grounds for troubled youth (Glavan et al., 2022). The combination of volatile youth and inconsistent discipline led to what one participant labeled a "culture of danger" (p. 516) for the students, teachers, and staff. Even when fights broke out, sometimes involving staff members, serious repercussions were rare. Free stated that the most interesting finding was the seemingly contradictory themes of culture: a culture of care provided by the staff and a culture of danger precipitated by the students.

In a qualitative study, Mills et al. (2016) conducted ethnographic observations and semistructured interviews at three alternative schools across Australia. The purpose of this study was to examine the two themes: affective justice, which relates to the relationship and supportive structures within a school, and contributive justice, which is

concerned with what a person is allowed, expected, or required to contribute. Mills et al. found that teachers were committed to the emotional well-being of their students, and ensuring affective justice was a significant concern within alternative schools. However, the authors found that these schools lacked contributive justice and did not prioritize curriculum and pedagogy. While the teachers explained that many of their students were not mentally capable of completing more rigorous assignments, Mills et al. observed that this attitude could condemn these disadvantaged students to a lifetime of marginalization. Therefore, an appropriate balance of affective and contributive justice is essential in educating at-risk students at alternative schools.

Bascia and Maton (2016) examined six alternative schools in the Toronto School District to qualitatively explore the conditions and experiences of secondary alternative teachers as they worked to meet their students' unique needs. The staff at these institutions received autonomy to experiment with different curricula and innovations to inspire their students. Bascia and Maton also found that teachers collaborated to bring innovation into the classroom, such as the Art of Math program that deals with the aesthetics of math. The authors stated that the structure of alternative schools, which includes minimal administrative oversights and involvement of students in decision-making skills, created a "situation where authority is pushed down to the school and classroom level, where curricular innovation is the norm" (p. 137). As observed by Free (2017), Flores and Brown (2019), and McGee and Lin (2020), the themes that led to the success of the programs were small class sizes, innovative and dedicated teachers, and autonomy not often found in traditional schools.

Blevins et al. (2017) used a qualitative case study to explore the experiences and perceptions of 48 preservice teachers engaged in fieldwork at an alternative school. The participants who were observing the alternative teachers reported witnessing disrespectful and discriminatory behavior toward their students. These findings directly contrasted with other researchers' findings regarding the relationships between students and teachers at alternative schools (Jordan et al., 2017). Additionally, while Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al. (2016) concluded that alternative schools were helping students academically, Blevins et al.'s participants disagreed. They reported that the regular schools had failed the students and the alternative schools continued to fail them.

In a qualitative study, Van Praag et al. (2017) conducted interviews and focus groups with staff members at several alternative programs in Belgium to understand how they support their at-risk students. While the education system and necessary graduation qualifications differ in Belgium from the United States, the goals of the alternative programs remain the same: to provide alternative education for students who do not fit in with mainstream education. The teachers reported that they struggled to balance the mandated curriculum with the more basic life skills that would help their vulnerable student population succeed outside the classroom, such as self-reliance and self-confidence. Like Free (2017) and Flores and Brown (2019), Van Praag et al. concluded that teachers at the alternative school prioritized students' emotional health over curricular demands, understanding that daily life and societal stressors are precursors to student academic success.

Preston and Spooner-Lane (2019) conducted a mixed-methods case study to understand the application of mindfulness to combat stress on alternative teachers in Australia. After completing a 6-week program, the researchers interviewed four participants and found that the mindfulness program positively impacted the participants. Additionally, Preston and Spooner-Lane concluded that mindfulness was particularly suited for alternative school teachers who experienced heightened levels of stress and high emotional intensity. Unlike the other studies, Preston and Spooner-Lane's analysis focused on the emotional well-being of the students rather than their relationships with their students.

Conclusions of Teachers' Experiences in Alternative Schools

Within the research on the experience of secondary alternative teachers, the common theme was that alternative teachers are focused on meeting the needs of the at-risk populations they serve through whatever means necessary. Except for Blevins et al. (2017), each study found that the teachers prioritized their relationships with their students and created an environment of personalized care and support (Duke & Tenuto, 2020). The attitudes of the teachers aligned with reports from the at-risk students themselves, who stated that their success in alternative schools stemmed from the individualized care and personalized education provided by their teachers (Ewing et al., 2021).

At-Risk Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic affected millions of students around the world. As a result, a plethora of research exists on the experiences of teachers, students,

administrators, and parents. The literature reviewed in this section focuses on the experiences of disadvantaged or at-risk youth who struggled more than their affluent peers due to limited access to the internet or technology, lack of parental support, and unstable home life (Catalano et al., 2021). Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) found that one in seven school-age children do not have access to the internet at home, and that of the $30 billion for educational emergency relief, no funds were specifically allocated for addressing educational gaps. According to Korman et al. (2020), around 3 million students in the United States went missing from enrollment at the start of the pandemic, most of whom came from disadvantaged households.

Lake (2020) created a database to quantitatively analyze thirty of the largest school districts across the United States. Lake's data analysis found that only one in three districts required teachers to conduct online instruction, with even fewer requiring teachers to take attendance or monitor student work. They also noted that technological challenges hindered students' progress in virtual education, a common theme across the literature (Antoni, 2021; Catalano et al., 2021).

Oster et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study in which they analyzed data from 1,200 public schools across the United States from January to April 2021 (Oster et al., 2021). This study aimed to determine the disparities across race/ethnicity groups in receiving in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oster et al. cited previous studies (Loades et al., 2020; Verlenden et al., 2021), which found that reduced access to in-person learning resulted in poorer learning outcomes, increased mental duress, and adverse behavioral effects. Oster et al. found that Hispanic and African American

students had disproportionally lower access to in-person learning during this period; 74.6% of European American students had access to in-person education, as opposed to 63.4% of African American students and 58.9% of Hispanic students. Oster et al. concluded that these disparities could lead to short-term increases in educational inequality.

Catalano et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected at-risk students. The authors used the phrase at-risk to include students in high-need, disadvantaged school districts, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Three hundred teachers serving 26,408 K-12 students in the New York City area completed an 18-question survey. Catalano et al. found that one-third of students did not regularly complete assignments during the switch to distance learning. In addition, students in disadvantaged districts were four times more likely to fail their courses. The authors also found that access to technology and parental support were crucial factors in students' success in online coursework during the pandemic and that at-risk students were less likely to have both than their more affluent peers.

Coker (2021) studied the pandemic's effects on juvenile delinquents. Like Reimer and Pangrazio (2020), Coker's participants were youths incarcerated in a short-term juvenile detention center. The author's mixed-methods study compared data from delinquents incarcerated before the pandemic (n = 26) with delinquents incarcerated during the pandemic (n = 28) and then conducted a case study to examine the latter group. Coker found that even prepandemic juvenile delinquents lacked the will or skills to find success in school. Contrary to the findings of Catalano et al. (2021), Coker

concluded that the switch to online learning during the pandemic did not have a negative impact on the youths in juvenile detention centers. However, the author agreed with the conclusions from other researchers (Ewing et al., 2021; Flores & Brown, 2019) that juvenile delinquents benefitted from engagement, interactivity, academic rigor, and care.

In a quantitative study, Easterbrook et al. (2022) analyzed the results of a survey of 3,167 parents in the United Kingdom to understand how gender and social inequalities affected home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent less time completing work in online courses as they did not have quiet areas free from distraction in which to work. They also echoed the findings of Catalano et al. (2021) and Lake (2020), who concluded that insufficient technology is a leading cause of inequality in low socioeconomic homes and added that over a million students across England do not have access to sufficient technology for distance learning (Horrocks, 2020).

Page et al. (2021) conducted a case study at a rural school in Australia to determine how teachers could virtually maintain school connectedness with disadvantaged students during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the schools implemented remote learning, teachers had to find new ways to communicate with their students and often had to differentiate their communication methods to meet each student's needs. Teachers provided students with school-issued computers and communicated with students using email, social media, and phone calls. They also conducted home visits to help set up technology and bring students hard copies of their lessons if internet access was unavailable. Page et al. found that despite the extra time and effort teachers put into

reaching their students and preserving socioemotional relationships, their students experienced a loss of school connectedness that led to feelings of isolation and a lack of commitment to school. The necessity of school connectedness, or what Mills et al. (2016) referred to as affective justice, echoes the findings of McGee and Lin (2020), who cited social and emotional support as necessary to help at-risk or disadvantaged students succeed in the classroom.

Mutch and Peung (2021) conducted a qualitative study to determine the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on at-risk students in New Zealand. The authors found that the lockdown exacerbated the inequalities between disadvantaged students and their peers. One-third of principals surveyed had concerns about the physical well-being of their students, as the lockdown increased levels of psychological distress, family violence, and suicide. Over half of the surveyed schools reported that students would begin the following year around 10 weeks behind, with at-risk students being affected the most due to disproportionate access to the internet and instability in home conditions. Additionally, Mutch and Peung (2021) interviewed at-risk students about their experiences during the lockdown. Like Page et al. (2021), Mutch and Peung's participants reported a loss of school connectedness and that the absence of social contact and structure led to anxiety. For older students with younger siblings, household stressors and their siblings' schoolwork caused additional anxiety. Additionally, older students expressed concerns for the financial and physical well-being of loved ones, which caused students to disengage from their schoolwork.

Antoni (2021) reviewed multiple reports to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected at-risk students. Dorn et al. (2020, as cited in Antoni, 2021) found that at-risk students were less likely to receive high-quality remote instruction, which they defined as instruction that led to academic success. Additionally, at-risk students experienced a magnified sense of disengagement and disconnectedness (Antoni, 2021), echoing the findings of Mutch and Peung (2021) and Page et al. (2021). Dorn et al. (2020) estimated that between 232,000 and 1.1 million students would drop out due to the COVID-19 pandemic; Hispanic Heritage Foundation (2020, as cited in Antoni, 2021) found that half of the students surveyed (n = 3,000) could not complete their online coursework due to technological inadequacies. Finally, Antoni found that at-risk students suffered academically more than their peers during the pandemic because they no longer had access to school support systems, such as mental health services, career counseling, and trauma interventions. The loss of these support systems was a common theme in research studies, with these concerns also cited by McGee and Lin (2020) and Page et al. (2021).

Conclusions of At-Risk Students' Experiences During COVID-19

The studies reviewed regarding at-risk students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic found that at-risk students experienced more significant struggles than their more affluent peers. One of the main reasons for this was unproportionate access to technology (Easterbrook et al., 2022). In addition, during the pandemic, technology was used not just for learning but also for social connectedness, leaving students behind in their schoolwork and feeling socially isolated (Page et al., 2021).

Students from at-risk backgrounds dealt with other hurdles that prevented equal learning opportunities. For example, many students found themselves helping younger siblings with their coursework, leaving little time for their work (Mutch & Peung, 2021). Also, many students lacked a quiet place to work or shared one device with multiple siblings which hindered their learning ability (Easterbrook et al., 2022). Students also suffered from the loss of support systems found in schools, such as teachers, guidance counselors, and peers (Antoni, 2021; Page et al., 2021).

Teachers' Experiences During the Pandemic

The literature on COVID-19's effects on teachers at alternative schools or teachers who teach at-risk students is sparse. Consequently, this literature review includes experiences of general secondary educators during the pandemic, focusing on minority students, marginalized students, or students located in low socioeconomic districts.

Kast et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to determine teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy regarding distance learning in Austria during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether these attitudes were affected by a student's low-income or special needs status. A total of 3,467 teachers across Austria completed an online survey. The authors found that teachers had a more negative attitude toward teaching students from low-economic backgrounds or low language skills and a positive attitude toward students who found outstanding success in the classroom.

Miller (2021) conducted a qualitative study to examine the real-time experiences of K-12 teachers enrolled in a graduate course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through journal entries and asynchronous peer conversations, the 20 teacher-participants reported

reprioritizing their relationships with students after shifting to remote learning. Many participants said they used the pandemic to reevaluate and reinvest their relationships with each student. The participants kept in contact with students primarily through video sessions and chat. Teachers made phone calls or mailed letters to reach those without internet access but stressed the importance of technology in maintaining student connections. Miller found that low-income students experienced isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and had less access to educational technology than their more affluent peers.

When schools transitioned to emergency remote learning during the pandemic, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) examined teachers' readiness for teaching online. They conducted a quantitative study surveying 1,186 U.S. and Norwegian teachers. The authors found that 92% of U.S. and 67% of Norwegian teachers had no experience with online teaching and no training in implementing technology. However, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway found that teachers demonstrated resilience and positive attitudes about shifting to online instruction while finding ways to utilize the technologies they were already familiar with to help their students. Like Miller (2021), Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway found that teachers' concerns for their students were a significant theme.

Kim and Asbury (2020) investigated the experiences of 24 teachers in the United Kingdom during the first six weeks of the pandemic. The authors' interviews identified six main themes: uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, the importance of relationships, teacher identity, and reflections. Like Miller (2021), the authors stressed the importance of student relationships. However, the participants also raised concerns

over the physical well-being of students due to unsafe homes, exposure to domestic violence, or a lack of food, echoing the findings of Mutch and Peung (2021). Additional findings echoed those of other researchers, such as at-risk students' inability to complete work online due to insufficient technology (Catalano et al., 2021) and the difficulty of engaging students in online activities (Kim et al., 2021).

Jones et al. (2021) used a mixed-methods study to explore how teachers expressed concerns for and acted against racial inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They sent out open-ended surveys to 42 teachers in a predominantly low-income, high minority district. The participants' expressed concern for students with unsafe home lives, low-income students, students with disabilities, and low-performing students. Additionally, Jones et al. found that the participants' concern for their students echoed the findings of other studies that revealed feelings of isolation and a lack of social connectedness (Mutch & Peung, 2021; Page et al., 2021), inadequate technology (Catalano et al., 2021), and a lack of engagement (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

Trust and Whalen (2020) surveyed 325 educators across Massachusetts to analyze their readiness for emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19. Most participants (61%) reported feeling overwhelmed and unprepared, regardless of previous experience in online teaching. They also reported frustrations due to the government's oft changing and uncertain educational directives. Trust and Whalen (2020) also found that many participants relied on informal, self-directed technology training, like Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020), who found most surveyed teachers received no formal technological training.

Grooms and Childs (2021) interviewed 34 principals at racially diverse schools to understand how they helped serve their racially and socioeconomically marginalized students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Mutch and Peung (2021), the authors found that the pandemic exacerbated the large divide between socioeconomic classes and races regarding educational and health access. A main concern of the participants was that many students ended up dealing with issues aside from education, such as having to take on full-time jobs (also noted by Mutch & Peung, 2021), facing homelessness, or being threatened with immigration enforcement. They also concluded that districts should allocate additional resources to provide marginalized students with immediate needs such as technology, wireless internet, and food, and that education could not be prioritized until those needs are met.

Conclusions on Teachers' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Three subthemes emerged throughout the theme of teacher experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first subtheme relates to teachers' preparedness to switch to emergency remote learning. Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) and Trust and Whalen (2020) concluded that schools did not adequately prepare teachers for the online switch, with participants relying on informal self-directed training to adapt to the necessary technology. Another subtheme emerged: educators reprioritized their relationships with their students (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Miller, 2021). Teachers tried to stay in touch with their students in whatever ways necessary, whether through technology, phone calls, or in-person visits. The final theme that arose was the concern for the well-being of their students. Grooms and Childs (2021), Jones et al. (2021), and

Kim and Asbury (2020) found that their participants were concerned with at-home issues such as homelessness, a lack of food, domestic violence, and immigration.

Conclusions

Alternative schools provided a haven for at-risk students. Students were allowed the autonomy to complete work at their own pace (McGee & Lin, 2020). Additionally, alternative schools provided students with personalized and one-on-one support (Hofer et al., 2020; Kamrath, 2019). Both students and staff reported the presence of caring and supportive relationships between students and staff (Ewing et al., 2021; Flores & Brown, 2019).

Online coursework allowed students to move at their own pace in their own time (Darling-Aduana, 2019; Ewing et al., 2021), many at-risk students succeeded in virtual classes. However, the asynchronous nature of these courses left many at-risk students feeling disconnected and isolated (Nourse, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic created more issues for at-risk students than their peers. Many students lacked technological resources (Catalano et al., 2021; Easterbrook et al., 2022). Others dealt with stressors unrelated to school, deprioritizing education (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). Many teachers of at-risk youth prioritized their relationships with students rather than educational content (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Miller, 2021).

While the experience of at-risk or minority students was the subject of few research studies, no research has been conducted on the specific experience of students or teachers at alternative schools. Furthermore, no present study has used the TLT to understand whether the disorienting dilemma of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered

cognitive dissonance, critical reflection, or transformational thinking. Applying this theory to alternative teachers' experiences could affect how teachers educate and support at-risk students during virtual learning and in times of crisis or turmoil

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I explain how I designed this study, the rationale for the chosen research design, and the construction of the interview guide. Additionally, I explain how I analyzed the data and the ways in which I ensured that my data were trustworthy and obtained ethically. This chapter includes sections on the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment and data collection, data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The central concept that was the focus of this study was the transition from in-person to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem presented in this study was that there is a lack of research on secondary alternative teachers' transformational learning experiences during their shift from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. This raised questions about how alternative school teachers adapted to meet the needs of their at-risk students. I used the following research question to guide my study, which was informed by the TLT: What were the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Using a basic qualitative study, I conducted interviews to investigate the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected alternative schoolteachers. The basic qualitative study allowed me to capture each individual point of view through one data collection strategy, semistructured interviews (Creswell, 2013). As the pandemic mandated closing all brick-and-mortar institutions, observations or case studies were not feasible designs for this study. Therefore, my design needed to allow for data collection through interviews alone.

Description of Design

I used a qualitative approach in my study. Qualitative research occurs when the researcher collects and interprets nonnumerical data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Qualitative researchers seek to explore concepts and phenomena, rather than to explain or manipulate variables, as is the case in quantitative research (Nassaji, 2020). According to Allan (2020), qualitative research requires the researcher to appreciate the various cultures, perspectives, and worldviews held by the participants.

Gathering data in qualitative research involves conducting interviews, taking field notes during observations, and collecting artifacts. Rather than focusing on quantifiable data, qualitative interviews allow the participants to expand upon research questions, allowing the researcher to find deeper meaning within the data (Jones, 2020). Qualitative research consists of a process of collecting, analyzing, explaining, evaluating, and interpreting the data (Nassaji, 2020). It is essential to ensure rigor and quality by verifying credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The specific research design I used was the basic qualitative. According to Keen (2018) and Kahlke (2014), the basic qualitative design is appropriate for investigating participants' experiences or perceptions and answering basic questions without using multiple rounds of interviews. The basic qualitative inquiry is used to "investigate people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world" (Percy et al., 2015, p. 78). Merriam (2009) explained that the basic qualitative design is appropriate when participants work to make sense of their lives and experiences. The basic qualitative tradition was appropriate for my study as I explored the experience of alternative teachers and how they have interpreted the changes in their profession. Aligning their experiences with the TLT and using the experiences to enhance their teaching skills and techniques provided insight, which is a critical component of the basic qualitative approach (Worthington, 2013). The basic qualitative approach was also appropriate when using only one data source. This approach was suitable for my study because I only used interviews and not artifacts or field observations (Merriam, 2017).

Justification

Educational research studies are often qualitative based. Researchers in qualitative studies examine the experiences of participants to gain a broader understanding of their lived experiences rather than analyzing numerical data that may not properly inform a participant's experience. In this section, I explain the basics of other research traditions and the reasons they did not align with my study.

Quantitative/Mixed Methods Tradition

I eliminated a quantitative study design for multiple reasons. Researchers who use quantitative research assume that there is an objective reality, leaving little room for interpreting experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). Instead of understanding how experience is shaped and gives meaning to individuals, quantitative studies use close-ended questionnaires to generalize experiences across a broad range of participants (Patton, 2015). Quantitative studies also need to include a vast number of participants to ensure data saturation. For example, Wilkerson, Afacan, Yan, et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study in which they surveyed 5,863 students, whereas Catalano et al. (2021) surveyed 26,408 students. As my study looked specifically at secondary alternative teachers in one region of the United States, gaining the necessary number of participants was unlikely.

Mixed methods studies combine quantitative and qualitative studies, allowing the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of various experiences (Shorten & Smith, 2017). However, mixed method research is also much more time-consuming and often requires more than one researcher to analyze both forms of data. As I was the sole researcher for this study, conducting a mixed-methods study over an extended period was not feasible.

Phenomenological

Phenomenology is a qualitative study design that also explores the experiences of individuals, though their experiences are centered around a particular phenomenon. In this approach, the phenomenon is the center of the study rather than the participant.

While my study did center on the COVID-19 phenomenon, this study did not examine the pandemic itself. It instead focused on how the alternative teachers' experiences during the pandemic shaped their practices, an insight which, Worthington (2013) noted, is not possible in phenomenological research.

Case Study

Case studies require the researcher to observe a particular setting over an extended period and include not just interviews, but also observations and field notes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, partaking in field observations was not feasible, mainly due to the required virtual instruction. Additionally, case studies provide a limited scope, as the researcher only observes a small number of cases. In the case of Blevins et al. (2017), their case study only involved observing staff and students at one alternative school, which led to results that contradicted the findings of other researchers of alternative schools. As I explored the experiences of alternative schoolteachers in a variety of settings and learned about their perceptions, a case study was not the best fit for this qualitative study.

Ethnographic

Ethnographies are ideal for exploring cultures and are conducted mainly through observations and detailed field notes (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). The culture of an alternative school is different from that of a traditional school, which is why I considered this approach. However, while my study involved the participants' personal narratives and lived experiences, the COVID-19 pandemic diminished researchers' ability to participate in field studies.

Summary

In conclusion, the basic qualitative design was the most effective research tradition. This research design allowed me to gain an understanding of how alternative teachers perceived their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this design allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews with a select number of participants without conducting field observations.

Role of Researcher

My role in this study was that of the instrument developer and the interviewer. In my role as the researcher, it was my responsibility to locate and interview alternative teachers who experienced the transition to virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following section, I explain my professional relationships and their effects on my study. I also explain researcher bias and the protocol employed to mitigate it.

Professional Relationships

My professional role for the past 11 years was as an English language arts teacher. I taught 4 years at a high school and 7 years at an alternative school that services middle and secondary students. I also served as the lead teacher at the alternative school. Because of my role as lead teacher and to avoid potential ethical issues, colleagues from my school were ineligible to participate in my study. For example, I did not want participants to feel indebted to me or uncomfortable in answering the questions honestly. By selecting participants unknown to me, I ensured that there were no conflicts of interest or power dynamics.

Researcher Bias and Ethical Issues

Because I taught at the alternative school during the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced the transition from in-person to virtual learning and the difficulties in maintaining relationships with the at-risk students. My knowledge of the transition could have caused bias on my part. I acknowledged that my own experiences teaching at-risk students during the pandemic may not have been the same as those of other alternative teachers and avoided letting any personal experiences sway my interpretations. I recorded field notes and personal reflections in a reflexive journal, including any possible instances of bias (Chan et al., 2013). These reflections occurred during the interviews, immediately following them, and throughout data analysis. Reviewing these notes allowed me to reflect upon my personal experiences to ensure objectivity and to separate my own thoughts from those of the participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For example, I made sure that all my questions were open-ended and were not leading; participants were given ample time to respond to each question freely and openly without fear that I was pressuring them for a particular answer (Jones, 2020). Acknowledging any personal biases also helped to ensure transparency and trustworthiness within my study.

My role as the sole researcher in this study was to conduct an unbiased investigation of the experiences of individuals. The researcher must acknowledge the subjective nature of personal interviews to objectively analyze the data (Saldaña, 2021). It was vital that I maintained my own positionality and self-awareness. Maintaining self-awareness included being continually cognizant of my prejudgments, values, perceptions, and connections to the topic (Creswell, 2013).

Bias in research can take many forms, and it is essential to be aware of them so that they can be avoided. One form of bias is confirmation bias, which occurs when the researcher interprets the data to fit their hypothesis (Chan et al., 2013). To avoid confirmation bias, I included and analyzed all the information provided to me, even the replies that seemed insignificant to me, or that did not align with expected responses. I also had my committee review my results on a regular basis and engaged in reflexive journaling to review any bias.

Methodology

In this section, I explain the methodology I used in this study. I explain the logic behind my participant selection, including the population of my participants and my sampling strategy. Additionally, I detail the creation of my instrument and the steps I took to ensure its accuracy and reliability.

Participant Selection Logic

The focus of this section is on the participant selection logic. I describe the logic that I used to select participants for this study, including the population and the sampling strategies, as well as the ways I recruited and selected participants. Additionally, I discuss the main sources I used to recruit participants and my logic behind my inclusion criteria. Finally, I discuss how I ensured data saturation in my data collection.

Population

For my study, my population was middle or high school teachers who taught at an alternative school. It was essential that participants taught immediately prior to and

during the COVID-19 pandemic. These teachers were in the South Atlantic region of the United States.

Sampling Strategy

I used purposive sampling to obtain a representation of alternative school teachers at the middle and secondary levels. According to Campbell et al. (2020), researchers use purposive sampling to select participants who are most likely to provide the appropriate data for a study. Specific groups of people hold different views about certain issues, so it is crucial that the researcher selects participants who will hold views on their subject (Mason, 2002). I used the first 12 to 15 participants who met eligibility criteria. I used snowball sampling to recruit participants to pass the study information onto others who might qualify (Parker et al., 2019). According to Parker et al. (2019), snowball sampling uses social networking to increase the sample size until data saturation is reached.

Inclusion Criteria and Verification

Any teacher with the following qualities was eligible to participate in this study: (a) taught in person at a middle- or high-school-level alternative school for at least 6 months immediately prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., before March 2020), (b) taught virtually at a middle- or high-school-level alternative school for at least 6 months during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine (i.e., March–December 2020), and (c) taught in the South Atlantic region of the United States (i.e., Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina).

To ensure that all participants met the required criteria, potential participants completed a prequalification survey using Microsoft Forms. The link to this survey was

on the bottom of the e-flyer. This survey included a series of questions to determine applicant eligibility. For example, the first question was about if participants worked in the South Atlantic region of the United States. If the potential participant clicked *yes*, they were directed to the next qualification question. If they clicked *no*, they received an online message thanking them for taking the survey but stating that they did not meet the inclusion criteria for this study. If they met the participant inclusion criteria, the branching functions of my prequalification survey hyperlinked the participant to an online virtual informed consent form. Once they consented, the survey directed them to fill in their contact information so that I could reach out to them to schedule an interview.

Justification of Desired Participants

I invited between 12 and 15 eligible teachers to participate in my study, as this is typically when data saturation occurs in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2020). The open-ended nature of the research questions allowed the participants to give in-depth answers to ensure that my data were rich and informative.

I chose to focus on the South Atlantic region of the United States because of the diversity of the population. According to Statistical Atlas (n.d.), the South Atlantic region of the United States is 59% European American, 12.8% Hispanic, and 22% African American, whereas the U.S. population is 62% European American, 16.9% Hispanic, and 12.6% African American. The lack of diversity in research, including diversity in culture, race, age, gender, or age, can have repercussions on a study, such as affecting the validity of the results and making the study ungeneralizable (Bell & Willis-Wallace, 2021). Some

alternative schools combine middle and high school into one program, which is why the inclusion criteria allow for both middle and high school alternative teachers.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Since my study focused on the experiences of alternative teachers during the pandemic, I recruited participants through the U.S. Alternative Educators Association (USAEA) organization, with backup plans to use snowball sampling and social media recruitment through alternative teacher groups. The South Atlantic region director of the USAEA agreed to include an e-flyer for my study in their monthly newsletter, which is roughly 550 possible participants. Having the USAEA director include this information in the newsletter ensured that the recruitment emails were not considered spam, increasing the likelihood of response rates. As these emails were targeted mailings to direct individuals, I anticipated a response rate of between 5% and 30% (Willott, 2019). I also posted e-flyers to social media sites such as the USAEA Facebook group, the Alternative Teaching Facebook group, and the Alternative Teachers Foundation Facebook group.

Aside from the USNAEA mailing list and the Facebook groups, I recruited participants through snowball sampling, which occurs when participants reach out to colleagues or peers who may be interested in participating in the study (Parker et al., 2019).

Data Saturation and Sample Size

Guest et al. (2020) stated that data saturation typically occurs during the first 12 interviews. To ensure data saturation, I interviewed 12 participants, noting when answers

from participants became repetitive in my reflexive journal. Around Interview 9, I found that I was not finding any new information, but I interviewed three more participants to verify that my data was rich and descriptive enough to answer my research question.

Instrumentation: Semistructured Interview Guide

In this study, I served as the researcher and used a semistructured interview guide as my only instrument. To guard against bias, I used the same semistructured interview (Appendix A) for each participant. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the researcher must work to remove bias when they are the primary researcher. The questions in the interview guide were informed by the TLT and the articles in the literature review and were vetted by two experts in the field of alternative education. As the interview guide was semistructured, this allowed the opportunity for participants to expand on the questions and allowed me the opportunity for follow-up questions.

Interview Items

The semistructured interview guide included 23 open-ended questions. I based these questions on the TLT quadrants and themes found within the literature review. I constructed each question so that it would create a conversation with the participant. Examples of questions in the interview guide included asking participants to reflect on their alternative school's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, their biggest supports and barriers in helping at-risk students during virtual learning, and how their perceptions of teaching at an alternative school have changed due to quarantine.

Content Validity

Content validity is the degree to which an instrument effectively calculates all aspects of the topic it aims to measure (Almanasreh et al., 2019). An instrument with high content validity is important because it verifies that the interview tool accurately reflects the content. I established content validity by having my interview guide reviewed by two experts in alternative education who collectively had over 60 years experience teaching and working with at-risk youth.

The first expert was an alternative school principal for middle and high school students in a southern state from 2004-2021. This expert had over 40 years of experience teaching and working with at-risk youth. Upon reviewing my questions, this expert found them satisfactory for my study and recommended no changes.

My second expert was a 20-year veteran in alternative education who teaches English and art at an alternative school in Missouri. The second expert also has a PhD in the effects of trauma on teens and young adults. He presents at alternative school conferences across the United States about educating and connecting with young trauma survivors. As he has experience working with alternative students, he suggested that I edit a few questions to gain more knowledge about the student population. For instance, instead of simply asking why the students are attending the alternative school, he suggested I ask *what are the top three reasons you feel why students are at your alternative institution?* He recommended this wording, allowing the participant to relate their own opinions and reflect on their population of students since they may not be aware of the exact reason each student is enrolled.

In the resulting interview guide, I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences teaching at alternative schools before the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, during the quarantine, and after the quarantine ended. Additionally, participants examined their roles as teachers, their relationships with students, and their general ruminations regarding the experience of teaching at-risk students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the TLT was the framework for my study, each question aligned with a particular transformative learning quadrant, as identified by Glisczinski (2007), or with elements from the literature review. For example, I asked participants to identify conversations they had with peers regarding implementing online learning during the pandemic, which aligned with Quadrant III, Rational Discourse, as identified by Glisczinski (2007).

Basis for Instrument Development

The semistructured interview guide included 23 open-ended questions. Elements of the TLT, articles in the literature review, and content experts informed each question. Appendix B maps the interview question alignment. For each question, at least one X marks the source that informed the interview question. For example, Question 2 asked the participants what they felt were the top three reasons students were at their alternative school. Two elements informed Question 2, including Aspiranti et al. (2021) and a content expert's phrasing recommendation. Question 7 asked participants to discuss their main concerns at the beginning of quarantine. The literature review (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020) and the first quadrant of Glisczinski's (2007) TLT informed this question. Catalano et al.'s (2021) study informed Question 12, which asked participants

to explain students' access to technology. Finally, the fourth quadrant of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007) informed Question 21, in which I asked participants to discuss which strategies from virtual learning they have carried over to in-person learning.

Processes for Generating, Gathering, and Recording Data

My partner organization, the USAEA, sent out e-flyers to potential participants. Those interested clicked on a link provided at the bottom of the e-flyer. Once they went through the approval process, I sent participants a copy of the interview guide to consider the questions beforehand. According to Roberts (2020), providing research questions in advance can help reduce stress for the participant and make the process more transparent. I interviewed each participant once for around 45 min.

Immediately preceding the interview, I verified that the Zoom audio recording worked by conducting test checks in advance. I also set up my iPhone to record the session as a back-up audio recording. I took out my reflexive journal and several writing utensils. I set up these elements at least half an hour before the scheduled start time to ensure the interview began at the scheduled time.

Once the participant arrived at the Zoom meeting, I followed my interview protocol guide (Appendix C) and used my semistructured interview guide to lead the discussion. I asked questions one at a time and gave participants ample time to think about the question, respond to the question, and ask for clarification as needed. I asked follow-up questions as was appropriate to gain the maximum amount of information from each participant. Once we completed the discussion, I moved to the next interview

question. No interruptions occurred during the interviews, and none of the participants requested to end the interview before its completion.

Following the interviews, I thanked the participant for their participation in the study. I then sent follow-up emails to all participants, including copies of the transcription and notes of thanks, at which point I included a $20 Amazon e-gift card to show appreciation for their time and effort. This small gift was not significant enough to incentivize imposter participants, a factor that would lead to less than credible results (Abdelazeem et al., 2022).

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis in qualitative research involves preparing and organizing transcripts to extract themes and understand the meaning of the data (Saldaña, 2021). According to Ravindran (2019), there are four main steps in preparing for qualitative data analysis. The first step involves transcribing the interviews and verifying the accuracy of these interviews. The second step is reading and reflecting on the transcripts and taking notes. The next step is coding and categorizing similar items within the transcripts. I compiled the transcripts from each interview into one Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the interview questions and each participant's response. The interview questions were arranged in rows down the left, with each participant assigned a column. Finally, I arranged the data within the spreadsheet so that I could recognize clusters of similar codes and use these codes to develop themes.

Transcription

I transcribed my audio recordings using the Otter.ai software. From there, I downloaded all transcripts verbatim into Microsoft Excel. I reviewed the transcript to verify it aligned with the audio recordings of the interviews. Once I verified the accuracy, I sent the transcripts to the participants for approval. This allowed participants to verify information or clarify confusing or misleading information in the form of transcript checking (Rowlands, 2021). I asked participants to send their feedback within 1-week.

Organizing Data for Analysis

According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), coding is the process of taking raw data and converting it into usable data by identifying themes and concepts. As Saldaña (2021) recommended hand-coding for first-time researchers, I used Microsoft Excel to hand-code the transcripts. Once I uploaded the transcripts to Microsoft Excel, I organized the transcripts into rows to make the information more manageable.

Coding Process

The first coding round occurred after I transcribed the data for each interview. I applied deductive coding, in which I used my a priori codes based on the framework's elements. I used codes from the phases of Glisczinski's (2007) transformative learning cycle, such as critical reflection and rational dialogue.

I used open coding during the second round after a priori coding. This analysis went beyond simply summarizing the data and included interpreting and making sense of the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). For each corresponding question, I input codes and

phrases from the interviews of each participant into the appropriate cell. I also used color coding, which helped me visualize common codes and potential themes (Saldaña, 2021).

My next step was using axial coding to make connections between codes and form clusters of similar groups. There are two steps in axial coding. In the first step, I searched for relationships among the codes and created categories. In the second step, I examined patterns and organized these clusters into distinct thematic categories.

Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns within my qualitative data. Thematic data analysis includes becoming familiar with the data, generating open codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up the results (Braun & Clarke, 2021). According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), it is important to focus on the relationships between the codes, themes, and research questions rather than on the number of times a code is repeated. I organized emerging themes into broader themes which connected to the research questions and the framework (Williams & Moser, 2019). Defining and analyzing these themes helped answer my research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases occur when the data from one source contradicts other sources (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). While reviewing the transcripts and coding, I found some discrepant data. I followed up with the provider of the information to clarify and verify the information (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). I then analyzed the discrepant cases and found an explanation for the results.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Shenton (2004), there are many ways to ensure trustworthiness, including frequent debriefing sessions with mentors and peers. The following sections detail the criteria for each component.

Credibility

Credibility refers to whether the collected data adequately represents the phenomenon (Shenton, 2004). One way to do this is to obtain data saturation, in which the researcher conducts enough interviews so that no new data is being obtained. Additionally, the researcher must confirm that a variety of people are interviewed so that they explore all participant experiences. To ensure data saturation was reached, I amassed enough participants so that I met the criteria for this and ensured that I followed all the necessary protocols regarding informed consent. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the likelihood of credibility and a lack of bias increases when the researcher collaborates with others to provide feedback and analysis. As the sole researcher, I did not have other researchers to collaborate with but provided my findings to my research committee to elicit feedback and conduct a dialogue. In doing so, I increased the credibility of my study. Additionally, I had my interview instrument reviewed by two experts in alternative education. These experts helped me adjust the questions' wording to ensure content validity and recommended some extra questions that provided additional insights.

Transferability

Transferability revolves around providing in-depth descriptions of contextual details. By providing these details, the reader can ascertain if your results could be transferred to other similar demographics and obtain similar results (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Creswell (2013), vivid details provided through the lens of the participant create thick descriptions, which aid in creating transferability. Maxwell (2020) adds that the transferability of data can be determined by whether the data represents the larger population. The location I used for my study contains a variety of urban, suburban, and rural areas, which helped to give data representative of a wide range of demographics.

Dependability

Dependability in research accounts for factors of instability or change. Strategies to ensure dependability include maintaining audit trails such as documentation of notes and data and keeping a reflexive journal to document personal notes and research processes (Walden University, 2016). According to Anney (2015), this audit trail allows others to replicate the study, leading to dependability and reliability. As such, I maintained an audit trail, saving all my documents, data, transcripts, and recordings on GoogleDrive and made them available to my committee members as needed.

Confirmability

Confirmability is when the results refer to the feelings of the subjects without the bias of the researcher (Cope, 2014). The role of the researcher must be explained, and the context provided. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their own

backgrounds, potential biases, views, and previous experiences that could affect the research process (Shenton, 2004). I kept a reflexive journal in which I recorded my immediate thoughts after the interview, as well as reflections on any personal bias that may have occurred during the interview. I also used transcript checking, which allowed participants to review data for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Rowlands, 2021). I provided copies of the transcripts, audio files, notes, and any other necessary artefacts to create confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

In this section, I explain how I ensured the ethical treatment of my participants and how I stored and managed my data. Additionally, I discuss other ethical concerns that I came across during my data collection and analysis process.

Treatment/Protection of Human Participants

I followed Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines to ensure ethical standards for the study and to protect my participants. I filled out the correct forms to complete the University Research Review process, which provided guidance through the process of conducting an ethical research study. Additionally, I completed the human subjects research training through the CITI program. By doing so, I worked out any potential ethical challenges before I began interviewing. I did not begin any of data collection until I received IRB approval from Walden University (Approval #05-16-23-0656733).

Several ethical concerns needed consideration while seeking participants. Participation in the study must be voluntary, and the participant must not feel pressured

or under undue influence. I did not interview any participants over whom I had power. Eliminating participants with whom I had personal or professional relationships ensured that participants did not feel obliged to participate and that my presence did not affect their responses.

All participants filled out consent forms that included a full disclosure of the study and the rights and requirements of the participants. I also informed participants of the purpose of the study and how the data collected in this study would be used. The informed consent form contained the full scope of the study and my contact information in case they had questions or concerns about their participation. I informed participants before, during, and after the interview that they may drop out of the study at any point.

Treatment of Data

It was essential that participants retain their privacy. I kept participants' information confidential and stored it on a password-protected laptop. I stored hand-written notes, reflexive journals, and printed transcripts in a locked cabinet in my office. I am the only person with access to the data's digital and hard copies. I also provided pseudonyms to all participants and participating organizations. After 5 years, all documents will be deleted or destroyed.

Other Ethical Issues

Other ethical issues could occur during research pertaining to conducting interviews within one's place of work, power differentials, or conflicts of interest. As I did not interview anyone with whom I have a relationship, I did not have to worry about

issues related to power dynamics. Likewise, I did not conduct any interviews in my place of work, and there were no conflicts of interest.

Summary

This chapter detailed my research plan and described how I conducted an accurate and dependable research study. I discussed why the basic qualitative study was appropriate for my research and its tenets informed my data collection procedures. I then detailed how I recruited participants. This plan explained my reasoning behind my recruitment criteria and how I used snowball sampling to ensure I met data saturation. I also described how I analyzed my data coding and analysis plan, including how these codes developed into themes to answer my research questions. Finally, I described the elements of a trustworthy study. I described the methods I used to ensure that I conducted an ethical study with credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I explain the setting of my study, the participants' demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

Setting

All study participants worked in an alternative school setting for middle and/or high school students. I recruited participants through my partner organization's mailing list. One obstacle to gathering my sample was the assumption that many teachers do not check their emails in the summer months. Because of this, I posted an e-flyer on the Facebook pages of various alternative school organizations and used snowball sampling. I offered each participant a $20 Amazon gift card to show my thanks for their time and contributions.

I conducted all interviews via Zoom during a time agreed upon with each participant in a private home office. Interviews lasted between 27 and 70 min. Interview lengths became longer as I grew more comfortable with the interview process and asked multiple follow-up questions. There were no disruptive occurrences during these interviews.

Demographics

The participants in my study represented a variety of locations, income levels, and ages. This diversity helped to create transferability in my research (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Alias	Age	Gender		Location				Ethnicity	
		M	F	Rural	Urban	Suburban	State	African American	European American
P1	40s	X		X			MS	X	
P2	40s	X			X		GA	X	
P3	50s		X		X		GA	X	
P4	30s		X		X		AL		X
P5	50s		X		X		SC	X	X
P6	50s	X			X		GA	X	X
P7	50s		X	X			MS		X
P8	30s		X		X		GA	X	X
P9	40s		X		X		SC	X	X
P10	40s	X				X	MO		X
P11	50s	X		X			GA		X
P12	30s	X				X	MS		X
Total		6	6	3	7	2		7	5

Each participant met the following requirements: (a) taught in person at a middle- or high-school-level alternative school for at least 6 months immediately prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., before March 2020), (b) taught virtually at a middle- or high-school-level alternative school for at least 6 months during the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine (i.e., March–December 2020), and (c) taught in the South Atlantic region of the United States (i.e., Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South

Carolina). The only exception to this was P10, who was a snowball sampling recommendation and taught in the Midwest.

Data Collection

I began the data collection process immediately upon receiving IRB approval on May 16, 2023. I interviewed a total of 12 participants between mid-May and August 2023. Each participant taught in the South Atlantic region of the United States, except for one participant from the Midwest, whom I contacted because of a snowball sampling recommendation.

Once the participant completed the online questionnaire and met the inclusion criteria, they filled out the informed consent. Then, I contacted them via phone or email to schedule a time to speak via Zoom. Each interview was recorded using Zoom's recording software and downloaded to a password-protected file on my computer. I then used Otter.ai (Liang & Fu, 2023) software to transcribe each interview and reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and clarity. I deleted participants' names on each file and replaced them with a participant number to ensure confidentiality.

At the beginning of my interview process, my line of questioning aligned tightly with the interview guide I created. I asked fewer follow-up questions, which caused the interviews to be shorter, ranging from around 20–30 min. As the interviewing process went on, I became more comfortable with going off-script and asking probing questions, which yielded much richer data and interviews ranging from 45 min to 1 hour and 10 min. After each interview, I recorded my thoughts and reflections in a reflexive journal (see Table 2).

Table 2

Excerpts From Reflection Journal

Participant	Excerpt
1	The first thing that noted was that I need to include a part in the informed consent for the participant to list their time zone. I took this for granted in this interview and assumed the participant, CR, was in my time zone. He was not. After panicking for 15 min that he was bailing (I texted him to confirm, and he did), I realized my mistake.
	My participant's district did not use technology at all during the pandemic and they had a weird policy where teachers could not contact their students by phone or text. This was interesting information, but I have concerns that if I used snowballing through this participant, they would likely say a lot of the same things, and I need to get multiple perspectives.
10	This was my longest interview, as the participant took the time to look through documents he kept during the pandemic. He analyzed his own records and, during our Zoom call, realized that the more he adapted his lessons to be pandemic-specific, the more students passed the course. This allowed me to ask a lot more follow-up questions and get more detailed information.
12	This interview made me realize how different circumstances were depending on the wealth of the community. I think this is the first participant in a wealthy district that I've interviewed – it's at least the first participant who told me that their district made them keep logs of how they used their time. I know my questioning went off the rails during this interview, but it was really fascinating to me how differently they experienced the pandemic than anyone else I've interviewed.

Using this process, I acknowledged that I tended to talk too much due to nerves and to fill any silences, which could create bias. Once I became aware of this, I made a point to give participants more time to consider their responses without interruptions. No unusual circumstances occurred during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

I loaded each interview into a single Microsoft Excel sheet for coding, which was designed by my methodologist. I divided the interview questions into three separate tabs:

- Questions 1–5: Related to teaching before COVID

- Questions 6–14: Related to teaching during the pandemic
- Questions 15–25: Postpandemic reflections

I then input each participant's response, along with the corresponding question number from the interview guide, into the appropriate tab, along with columns to input a priori, open, and axial coding. My data collection process aligned with procedures outlined in Chapter 3.

Preparing the Data for Analysis

I transcribed the audio recordings from individual interviews to prepare the data for analysis. I labeled each interview with an anonymous identifier assigned to each participant, such as P1, P2, and so forth. These steps were vital because they ensured the confidentiality of each participant so that my data trail did not include any identifying information. I secured the accuracy of the transcripts by reading through each one multiple times and comparing unclear transcription data with the audio files. I then sent the interviews to individual participants for transcript checking. Of the 12 participants, five responded to my follow-up emails and approved the content as-is.

Once these data were saved and filed, I read all the documents to establish accuracy. I organized the data into one master coding spreadsheet. I labeled each piece of data with the corresponding interview question number and the participant identifier. Once I input all data, I began coding the transcribed data.

Coding Procedures and Processes

I analyzed my data in three phases. The first phase I used was a priori coding, followed by open coding, and finally axial coding. In this section, I explain the steps I took for each phase and provide descriptions and examples for each.

A Priori Coding

I began the coding process using a priori coding based on this study's framework. Table 3 includes the a priori codes that I used to analyze participant data, along with examples. I logged the code, participant identifier, and excerpts from the data sources during the coding process. All data were from semistructured interviews.

Table 3

A Priori Codes From Interview With Examples

A priori code	Participant	Excerpt
Q1	P5	Could I have done more? I'm sure I could have. But considering the circumstances, honestly, no, I think we, as a society, the U.S., we failed drastically in that area. But again, who's to say anything? Because none of us even knew what was going on.
Q2	P1	I wish we had had access to Zoom or some type of virtual learning. I wish we had had the training prior to. And computers. Again, not every kid had a computer at home. I felt like I didn't know what to do. Like I have teacher friends that were talking about Zoom classrooms or Google Classroom. I don't know how to do any of that kind of stuff. I still struggle with Zoom.
Q3	P9	One of those questions we had went back to engagement, because in the classroom situation, you know, our kids can become so disengaged. And that's when we have them face-to-face and we're able to provide redirections. But not being there, you know, trying to connect with them on any of these platforms, we spoke about what that would look like, how would we do this? And then also, for those students who did not come in to get their devices, how would we cater to those students?
Q4	P12	I reflect to those times that we were virtual and think about myself, of how I expressed that I truly cared about the students, because sometimes students don't perceive it as you care for them.

I identified four a priori codes from the framework of the study. Each of these a priori codes aligned with a quadrant (Q) from Glisczinski's (2007) TLT: disorienting dilemma (Q1), critical reflection (Q2), rational dialogue (Q3), and action (Q4).

Open Coding

My next step was creating additional codes, which I reduced by applying open coding to the data set. Additionally, I searched the data for similarities and labeled groups of words with a term that provided meaning to word groups (Williams & Moser, 2019). I then used open coding to identify key words and phrases within each response. For

example, two open codes I identified were *emotional repercussions* and *adapted lessons*. Table 4 shows how I shared open codes and participant excerpts from the data source.

Table 4

Open Codes by Source With Examples

Open codes	Participant	Excerpt
Low socioeconomic environments	P2	A lot of my kids come from low socioeconomic environments, drug infested, and crime infested environments. So, their well-being, their access to those unwanted environments, their propensity to become more involved in those environments, that we fought long and hard to try to keep them out of. So those were some of the things that really set in the forefront of my mind during that time.
Gaps in education from COVID	P11	I think there was a lot of students that were passed on without doing the work, and now we're seeing the repercussions of that.
Relationships with students	P3	The kids in this area are very much feeling phobic. They don't want you to know how they feel. They don't want you to know that they're scared.

In my data results, I provide examples of labels I applied and the process of combining, reducing, or adding new tags in the open coding stage. I recorded a total of 47 open codes that I generated in this process.

Axial Coding

During the axial coding stage, I searched the open codes and corresponding excerpts from the interviews to identify the relationships among the open codes. I grouped similar open codes and assigned a code to each category (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). As I worked, I recorded the process in my research journal. Table 5 shows the axial codes from the open-coded categories.

Table 5

Number of Open Codes That Informed Each Axial Codes With Participant Excerpt

Open codes *(n)*	Axial codes	Participant	Excerpt
6	Need for SEL postCOVID	P10	I think that that it hurt not only their academics, but their emotional abilities. I've said it repeatedly this year, are sophomores and juniors. It is latently obvious that they suffered emotionally. And they are less socially developed.
3	Academic learning gaps	P6	I listen to teachers talk among themselves. These are the pandemic kids. The expectation for them is not high. The expectation is, they don't know anything, because of the pandemic.
4	Real-world adaptations	P8	I try to make lessons applicable to their lives. I'm always doing life lessons. And kids are like, oh, I didn't realize that that was science. Something as simple as losing your keys and using the steps of the scientific method unknowingly to find them.
7	Incorporating technology	P5	I would let them do TikTok videos. They would make commercials, like, okay, create a facemask, and then you're going to try to sell us on that mask. And they would get on and they create a mask, even if they drew it or tried to make one or decorate it, whatever. And they would get on and show their TikTok video or they would do a commercial.
5	Lack of accountability	P4	We just passed them on. Because you cannot hold them accountable. It's not the child's fault that they didn't have quality instruction. It's not the child's fault that their parents pawn their computer. You know, it's the difference between like having lights or electricity during the winter months, or, you know, not having a computer so it's like, it kind of became an ethical conundrum like how do you justify failing the student especially in a global pandemic that we had never had before?
2	Truancy	P9	We were given the option of using Zoom or Google Meet. Most days, it was me, myself, and I. Most of my kids did not show up, or they would pop in for a few seconds, if they didn't see any other students, then they would be gone.
5	Basic needs unmet	P2	My priority is the students, not academic content, because it's hard to focus on math when you haven't eaten in 48 hours or when you haven't had shelter.
3	Unmet academic goals	P11	A lot of our kids were sent home without the maturity level of having a self-motivation deal going on, and they didn't have the support at home to be encouraged to work, or they just wouldn't do it.

Open codes *(n)*	Axial codes	Participant	Excerpt
7	Relationships with students	P12	I think they saw that we cared, you know, that, that we were here. And like, you're going out to their house to deliver a textbook. I think they really saw at that point that we cared. So that changed their behavior with us. And they were more responsive to us.
5	Supporting students	P4	I feel like I kind of owe it to my kids to work a little bit harder. They are the redheaded stepchildren. They don't get the attention at their home school that you know the shiny A plus student gets.

For example, I grouped codes such as *adapting lessons*, *engagement = real life*, and *real-world lessons* and created the axial code *real world adaptations*. After I maximized the categories with axial coding, I shared the entire coding process in my data results narrative. There were 10 axial codes. Appendix D shows the definitions of all codes in my study.

Thematic Analysis

My final step in the data analysis process was to combine axial codes into themes, which I used to answer my RQ. The goal of the coding process was to generate themes that were revealed through the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To create themes, I resumed searching among the categories and raw data for additional patterns. These patterns were the key concepts I used to explain the analyzed data. In this study, I specifically sought themes to address the transformative learning experiences of alternative teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. From my analysis, four themes emerged from my search for patterns across categories:

Theme 1: Teachers believed that students experienced academic and social-emotional learning loss during the pandemic.

Theme 2: Teachers adapted relationship-building techniques with students.

Theme 3: Teachers believed students did not prioritize academics during the pandemic.

Theme 4: Teachers implemented technology and real-world adaptations into their curriculum.

These fact statements accurately represent the participants and the belief relative to the phenomenon as the raw data support them. After I identified the themes that emerged from the study, I validated that the themes were aligned with the coding and informed the RQ in this study. Table 6 displays how a priori, open, and axial coding informed each theme.

Table 6

A Priori, Open, and Axial Codes That Informed Each Theme

Codes						Themes
A priori				Open	Axial	
Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4			
X	X	X	X	Poverty; familial deaths; unsafe situations; need for SEL; emotional repercussions; students struggling to adapt back to in-person learning; interventions; learning gaps postCOVID	Need for SEL postCOVID; academic learning gaps	Students experienced academic and social-emotional learning loss during the pandemic.
X	X	X	X	Student engagement; adapting lessons; necessity of flexibility and adaptation; adapting lessons to real-life issues; including technology into lessons; technology; Google Classroom; TikTok; assignments online; Zoom	Real-world adaptations; incorporating technology	Lessons adapted to include technology and real-world learning increased student engagement during the pandemic.
X			X	Students not showing up for Zoom; students not completing work; passing kids through; students don't think they can fail; truancy; no parental buy-in; lack of value on education; not meeting students' goals; unstable home lives; hunger; homelessness; instability during COVID	Lack of accountability; truancy; unmet academic goals; basic needs unmet	Education was not a priority for many of their alternative school students during the pandemic.
X	X	X	X	Maintaining connections with students; relationship with students; building relationships with students; expressing concerns about students; safe space during COVID; checking in; communication with students; communications with parents; lack of communication; inspiring students; relating to students	Relationships with students; supporting students	They struggled to maintain connections with students and reevaluated how to create relationships during the pandemic.

During the process coding, I analyzed my a priori codes, as well as the axial and open coding, and used these codes to create four themes, which I used to answer my research question.

Discrepant Cases

Two main factors influenced discrepancies in my data collection: location and poverty levels. Poor, rural districts needed additional resources to switch to online learning. Because of this, students had less access to technology, leaving many without a computer or internet access. In these cases, students received paper packets rather than virtual coursework and did not obtain any direct instruction. Wealthier districts provided students with individual devices and internet hotspots, allowing them to receive direct instruction and adapted lessons virtually. I discuss the discrepant cases in more detail within the results section.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I followed several protocols to ensure my data collection and analysis processes were trustworthy. This process started when I began gathering participants. I contacted any individuals who qualified to schedule interviews after they filled out the informed consent documents. I recorded each interview using Zoom's built-in recording software. After each interview, I transcribed the raw data using Otter.ai and then sent it to the participant for transcript checking, which ensured credibility (Rowlands, 2021). Once the participant approved the transcription, I proceeded with data analysis. My dissertation chair and methodologist reviewed my work to verify I followed all outlined protocols. They also provided me with feedback throughout this process.

I ensured transferability by gathering and reporting on demographic information for each participant. My participants' demographics varied to represent the larger population. Their ages ranged from early 30s to late 50's, representing urban, suburban, and rural areas (see Table 1). To ensure dependability, I maintained an audit trail, saving all my documents, reflexive journals, data, transcripts, and recordings on GoogleDrive and making them available to my committee members as needed. My reflexive journal also helped to ensure confirmability, as it helped me to maintain awareness of my positionality and to work through any potential bias on my part. Finally, I used transcript checking, allowing participants to review their statements and amend any potentially misleading information. The use of these strategies ensured that my study was trustworthy.

Once I began the process of data analysis, I used a master coding Excel spreadsheet. This coding tool allowed me to organize my data and sort fields as needed. With this tool, I discovered codes and themes from multiple angles, leading to a deeper understanding of my data and the results. It also ensured that I looked at every piece of data and noticed potential codes, which helped establish dependability.

Results

In the following section, I detail the four themes I discovered. I provide evidence from my interviews to support these themes. I also discuss how I connected each theme to Glisczinski's (2007) framework and how these themes helped to answer my research question.

Theme 1: Students Experienced Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Loss During the Pandemic

The first theme that emerged was that students experienced academic and SEL loss during the pandemic. Students experienced a disturbance not only in their education but also in their emotional and mental wellbeing. After the onset of the disorienting dilemma, participants experienced Quadrants II and III of the TLT, in which they analyzed where their students were academically and socially and where they would like them to be (Glisczinski, 2007). Participants who engaged in critical reflection and rational discourse, which involved examining past beliefs, identifying new strategies, and brainstorming with colleagues, were more adept at problem-solving solutions to help their students combat their learning loss postpandemic.

Academic Learning Loss

As discussed in the literature review, traditional high school students experienced academic learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). The same applies to alternative students, with eight participants in this study reporting their students struggled academically during and after the pandemic. P8 said her credit recovery class sizes grew exponentially after the pandemic due to academic learning loss, rising from 200-300 students prepandemic to nearly 500 postpandemic. “I think there were a lot of students that were passed on without doing the work, and now there’s repercussions. We’re seeing huge gaps in math and language art skills. Now we're trying to make up ground,” P11 said. P4 and P11 observed that many parents could not

help with assignments, as many of their students would be the first in their families to graduate from high school.

Additionally, P6 observed that many teachers lowered their academic content standards, saying, “I think we cut so much meat out of the lessons. I don’t think we accomplished much at all during that period.” P6 said that even for students who logged on and completed their assignments, their learning content was less rigorous than prepandemic, furthering the academic learning loss. The reflections from P4, P6, P8, and P1l align with Glisczinski’s (2007) Quadrant III of the TLT, in which individuals examined the evidence and explored their perceptions of events.

Certain participants already taught classes preCOVID that were primarily virtual based. These participants, such as P3 and P8, credit recovery teachers, and P5, a career and technology teacher, noted that students struggled less in transitioning to virtual learning due to their familiarity with the online platforms. P3 said, “Before the pandemic, the strategy that helped them the most was the online curriculum. They like doing the credit recovery classes online.” The students were comfortable with their online credit recovery classes, so the transition to virtual school during the pandemic was smooth. P8, who estimated around 80% of students completed their coursework during the pandemic, stated that their heavy use of technology prepandemic helped them during the transition and that they had taught several other teachers different technological teaching applications. P8 described how they helped the science department incorporate technology prepandemic using Google Classroom and WebQuests, adding, “That really was a blessing in disguise.” P3, P5, and P8, who experienced Quadrant II of the TLT as

they examined previous practices and incorporated new knowledge, reported that their prior use of technology in the classroom resulted in students suffering less academic learning loss than in other courses.

Social-Emotional Learning Loss

Many participants reported that their students experienced emotional and mental traumas during the pandemic and dealt with things their teachers were ill-equipped to manage. “There were many physiological and emotional variables,” P4 reported. Along with the isolation caused by the pandemic, students suffered the deaths of family members and financial instability. P5 and P10 had students whose loved ones died from COVID-19, with one student losing his mother and father. Other participants expressed their worries that school was the main factor keeping students out of trouble. P2 voiced concerns about their students’ access to unsafe environments, stating, “A lot of my kids come from low socioeconomic environments, drug, and crime-infested environments. Their access to those unwanted environments, their propensity to become more involved in those environments, is a concern.” P2 added that, for the students who already dealt with instability at home, the pandemic exacerbated their situations.

Several participants recalled feeling that schools did not address students’ emotional and mental repercussions. P8 observed that administrators and leaders talked frequently about the learning loss students suffered, “But nobody talked about the emotional quotient (EQ). We talked about IQ. Nobody talked about EQ.” While the school did provide 30 min daily for SEL, P8 did not think it was enough and engaged in rational dialogue (i.e., Quadrant III) by recommending several hours of SEL a day to

combat the students' worsening mental and behavioral issues. P6, who taught in a major urban area, noted that his students had trouble dealing with their emotions, saying, "The kids in this area are feeling-phobic. They don't want you to know how they feel or that they're scared, teary-eyed, or something bothers them. Most of them try to put on a front." Some students struggled to adapt back to the in-person environment, experiencing stress and anxiety. According to P9, one student learned virtually for so long that she needed anxiety interventions to return to the classroom and said, "She's like, I just don't know how to adjust. I just don't know how to interact and to socialize in this environment, because I'm not used to being around other people. I'm just home, behind a computer screen." P4 and P9 voiced concerns that teachers could not handle many of the crises their students went through, and P9 added that they felt pressured to be therapists as well as teachers. This realization and the participants' desire to apply more SEL techniques in the classroom aligned with QIV, in which individuals are more adept at critical thinking when encountering new experiences (Glisczinski, 2007).

Several participants, such as P3, P4, and P11, reported that their alternative schools saw a rise in enrollments once school resumed in-person after the pandemic. According to P4, "We had 500 students waiting for the disciplinary board to decide if they would be placed at the alternative school due to behavior infractions." Likewise, P11 noted that students' behaviors worsened once they returned from the pandemic, adding that the number of students attending their punitive-based alternative school doubled. P11 observed this due to a rise in students' unruly behavior and difficulties adjusting to mainstream traditional education.

Discrepant Case

All but one teacher reported that their students experienced notable gaps in their social-emotional and/or academic learning during the pandemic. However, P12, a teacher in a suburban school district that had a very low percentage of residents living below the poverty line (as identified by the National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), noted that their students did not experience any learning loss. While other participants described shorter class times and relaxed academic demands, P12 noted their district cracked down. Teachers were required to submit logs detailing each day's lesson plans, which had to amount to 8 hours. The district's rigorous approach also included sending teachers directly to students' houses as needed and daily Zoom faculty meetings. P12 recalled feeling frustrated by this at the time, explaining, "We wanted to be doing fun things, sitting out by the pool, waking up when we wanted." P12 engaged in critical reflection, saying, "But when we came back and saw what we prevented, the morale changed." The district's determination to maintain high standards paid off, resulting in the highest test scores in the state. This testimony is at direct odds with the statements of the other participants, who noted their students experienced learning loss during the pandemic. This discrepant case was related to the resources of P12's district, which allowed for higher expectations.

Additionally, P12 did not think their students experienced any social-emotional learning loss. P12 explained, "Being an alternative school, you have a lot of kids that don't care much, so if the governor says you're mandated to stay at home, that's like fuel on the fire of them going out". P12 added that their students still interacted outside and

socialized as most had cars to meet up with friends and that very few showed up postpandemic who needed emotional components to help them. P12's account directly contradicted reports from participants in rural districts, such as P1's, who did not have transportation available, thus creating more social isolation.

Transformative Learning Experiences in Theme 1

The data analysis regarding students' academic and SEL loss helped informed the research question. While not all participants cycled through all four quadrants of the TLT, those who analyzed their preconceptions of teaching employed critical reflection and engaged in rational dialogue. P4, P6, P9, P10, and P11 reached Quadrant IV when they adapted their methods based on their conclusions to meet the needs of students during the pandemic. The transformative learning experiences of alternative teachers during the pandemic aided in participants' problem-solving abilities to help their students combat learning loss postpandemic. P1 and P7, who had no communication with their students, could not identify SEL or academic learning gaps, preventing them from experiencing transformative learning.

Theme 2: Teachers Adapted Relationship-Building Techniques With Students

The second central theme I uncovered through my data analysis was that participants had to rethink how to create and maintain relationships with students during the pandemic. The transformative experiences associated with this include Quadrant II, Quadrant III, and Quadrant IV (Glisczinski, 2007). In Quadrant II, participants evaluated how they had formed relationships with students before the pandemic and how they could move forward. Participants then moved into Quadrant III, exploring new practices and

reconceptualizing what relationship-building looked like in a virtual setting. An example of a participant's Quadrant III experiences was P10, who formed bonds with students through a virtual pet show-and-tell. Finally, participants moved into Quadrant IV when they changed their behavior to form close bonds with students (Glisczinski, 2007). I provided examples from participants in the below sections.

Relationships Prepandemic

Students who enrolled at alternative schools due to previous behavioral issues often had negative interactions with members of authority before attending the alternative school and were guarded about trusting new adults. Many came in with a "tough-guy attitude, ready for a fight", which P2 called the prison effect, saying students were often profane, disruptive, and confrontational. "As soon as they meet you, they are very vocal about their displeasure with being there. And how [it] is usually not their fault. They want to blame you as a school member for being there," P2 said. Despite this, the participants worked persistently to break down students' walls to form relationships. P6 observed that teaching at an alternative school takes a lot of love, patience, and experience. "If you don't have that, you will likely want to leave after a year. We've had people leave after a month," P6 said. Prepandemic, the patience and resilience displayed by alternative teachers was crucial to the success of at-risk students.

Before the pandemic, teachers used small class sizes to get to know their students and develop connections. P10 reported that upon learning a particularly introverted student was interested in role-playing games, they created a Dungeons and Dragons club after school, which helped students form connections and express themselves. P6, a

former attorney, described how they shared their own past experiences to forge bonds with their students. P6 explained that they had not always made good life decisions but said, “I want you to understand bad decisions are just that. *Bad decisions* do not mean [a] *bad individual*.” Creating this bond helped students understand they could overcome their current circumstances and not let their mistakes define their lives.

Relationships During the Pandemic

The switch to online education necessitated teachers to rethink how they built relationships with students. Those teaching the same students all school year had an easier time maintaining their relationships, but they still struggled to connect with their students on the same level that they had been. P3, P6, P9, and P10 noted a disconnect with their students during the pandemic. P10, who had previously forged relationships with students by homing in on their interests, lamented the distance and struggled to incorporate new techniques. P10 noted the fine line between finding common bonds and overstepping, saying, “You don’t want to look in the background too much. Oh, you have a poster of this musician. I like them too. I’m looking in your bedroom. Yeah, that gets weird.” P11 reported that teachers in their district created highlight videos to show students what they had been doing during the pandemic to sustain bonds. While these videos, which align with Quadrant IV of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007), may not be the same as daily face-to-face contact, they helped the students realize that the teachers still cared.

Some participants, however, reported that their relationships with their students only grew stronger during the pandemic. P2 said their daily conversations with their

students, whom they had taught all year in a small classroom environment, helped strengthen their relationships. P8 echoed this sentiment: “We’ve developed a different type of relationship because I’m at your house and you’re at my house.” P12, who would stop by students’ houses to deliver textbooks or check in on them, said that this action made students realize how much their teachers cared for them. Not all participants had been able to form bonds with students before the pandemic, though. P4, P8, and P10 did not meet some students face-to-face until school resumed the following school year. P8 recalled an emotional moment when they met a student for the first time face-to-face, saying, “She just hugged me and said I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Discrepant Cases

While the other participants reported regular communication with their students during the pandemic, two said they had no communication with students. P1, located in a rural school district where most people did not have internet access, disclosed that their district did not give students individual devices and had a strict policy forbidding teachers from communicating with their students via phone call or text. This policy, combined with a lack of technology, effectively shut off any means teachers had to communicate with their students. P7 relayed that their only communication with students was via email, but most never checked their email. Students did not have their peers at school to rely on, and they also could not receive support from their teachers.

Transformative Learning Experiences in Theme 2

The varied transformative learning experiences of participants in this theme helped to answer my research question. The participants who could still contact their

students explored methods for maintaining contact and keeping them engaged. Those who fully cycled through the TLT, such as P2, P8, P10, and P12, formed deep connections with students despite not having face-to-face contact. According to Glisczinski (2007), individuals who experienced transformative learning were more adept at producing new ideas rather than regurgitating traditions. P2, P8, P10, and P12 transitioned from knowing their students to understanding them, a distinction Glisczinski (2007) noted is crucial in the transformative learning process. P1 and P7, who could not communicate with their students during the pandemic, did not experience transformative growth, as they did not reintegrate ideas and practices to form relationships.

Theme 3: Students Did Not Prioritize Academics During the Pandemic

The next theme I found during data analysis was that some students did not prioritize academics during the pandemic. Several participants reported that outside stressors inundated their students, which took precedence over education. P9 reflected on students' perspectives (Quadrant II) and noted that some students' families struggled with unemployment, necessitating them to get jobs to help support their families. "They were so afraid of what was going on and the outcomes. Trying to log in and engage was really the furthest thing from their mind," P9 added. P4, a teacher in an urban district where most students received qualified for free lunches, stated that the district passed students on and lamented the ethics of failing a student during a global pandemic. P4 recounted that they had a student whose parent pawned their school computer to pay for electricity and that some of their students faced homelessness. Several participants echoed this sentiment whose students struggled with necessities during the pandemic. P2 and P5

worried their students would be without food, as they often only ate when they came to school. P2, P4, and P5's understanding of students' situations aligned with Quadrants II and III of the TLT, in which participants reflected on their beliefs regarding education and assessed others' points of view (Glisczinski, 2007).

Additionally, participants noted that many of their students knew they would not fail. According to P5, their school district announced early in the pandemic that they would pass every student, at which point the students gave up completing assignments. P4 noted that many of their students were approaching 18 years old with the credits of ninth graders, saying, "They would be like, I don't care, I'm gone." The pandemic caused some already disillusioned with school to retreat further from education.

Discrepant Case

In the case of P12, district officials continued prioritizing education during the pandemic. The district expected students and teachers to continue to meet their diligent standards virtually. The advanced resources of this community meant that P12's students did not have the same outside stressors, such as poverty or homelessness, that affected students in other districts.

Transformative Learning Experiences in Theme 3

Participants who experienced all four quadrants of the TLT understood that many students could not prioritize their education during the pandemic. Several participants, such as P4 and P5, maintained minimal contact with their students but still understood that their circumstances caused these issues rather than the students themselves. The transformative learning experiences of participants enabled them to understand the

perspectives and experiences of students (Glisczinski, 2007). P1, whose district denied teachers the ability to contact students, did not engage in transformative learning, as their circumstances prohibited them from engaging in critical discourse and applying learned knowledge (Glisczinski, 2007).

Theme 4: Teachers Implemented Technology and Real-World Adaptations Into Their Curriculum

The next theme I discovered in my data analysis was the need for teachers to adapt their lesson plans to include technology and real-world lessons during the pandemic. As alternative teachers struggled with student engagement and attendance, they sought new ways to entice their students. Participants experienced transformative learning when they could implement new strategies and activities into their lessons to adapt to the circumstances (Glisczinski, 2007).

Incorporating Technology

During the pandemic, the traditional technological staples of teaching, such as Google Classroom and Zoom, were not enough to hold students' attention, forcing teachers to look elsewhere on the internet for engaging activities. Several participants, such as P5, P6, and P10, enticed their students through preexisting videos or audiobooks. P6 noted, "I think using electronics is a big deal with them. I use YouTube, History Channel, even Khan Academy, where they will watch a video." P5 incorporated the popular app TikTok into their lessons to stimulate interest. P10, who taught English and art prepandemic, allowed students to listen to audiobooks instead of reading novels and swapped out the art curriculum for film studies. "I was making it up as I went along, just

trying to make stuff interesting. It was like building the plane while you're flying it," P10 mused. P5, P6, and P10's innovative use of technology aligned with Quadrant IV of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007), as they used critical thinking and incorporated multiple perspectives to figure out what would interest students.

Real-World Adaptations

Before the pandemic began, the alternative teacher participants provided students with real-life, hands-on learning opportunities to stimulate engagement. P10 noted that technical learning was imperative because many students at the alternative schools were not college-bound. P11 explained, "We would teach the students basic stuff, how to change a tire. We had a cooking room where the chef would come in and teach them how to cook small dinners that students would prepare." Once the pandemic hit, these hands-on learning opportunities were no longer available, and teachers had to find ways to create engaging lessons virtually. Participants who adapted their lessons to real-life learning opportunities experienced Quadrant IV of the TLT and noted an increased engagement in their students. P5, a business teacher, asked students to market their brands of face masks, for which they then created advertisements using popular apps such as TikTok and Snap Chat. P5 observed, "I don't have problems with kids falling asleep in my class. They are so engaged because they like coming to that learning environment instead of memorizing things." P9, a science teacher, used their unit on viruses to teach students about the COVID-19 virus. "We talked about viruses, how they mutate, and how they may be transmitted. These were very real to our students because they've lived it. It allowed them to share what they knew." P9 added that this personal knowledge allowed

students to connect with the material and emphasized the importance of the unit. There were no discrepant cases within this theme.

Transformative Learning Experiences in Theme 4

The participants who adapted their lessons to include technology and real-world applications experienced Quadrant IV of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007). In the final Quadrant IV stage, P5, P6, P9, and P10 transformed their behaviors and teaching styles to meet the needs of their students. They incorporated multiple viewpoints, engaged in proactive thinking, and transformed their lessons to benefit their students. P5, P6, P9, and P10 perceived that the transformative learning experiences helped increase student engagement through their abilities to engage in knowledge construction and critical thinking (Glisczinski, 2007).

However, not all participants went through transformative learning. P1, a teacher in a rural district, said the district did not provide technological devices and instead sent home paper packets. Additionally, P7 did not have the autonomy to create or edit students' lessons and thus was unable to provide adaptations. Because of these restrictions, P1 and P7 could not move beyond Quadrant I, the disorienting dilemma, into Quadrant II, critical reflection.

Summary

In this section, I discussed my data collection and analysis processes. I then shared how I coded my data to develop themes and used these themes to answer my research question. I developed four themes throughout my data analysis: students experienced academic and social-emotional learning loss, teachers adapted relationship-

building techniques with students, students did not prioritize academics during the pandemic, and teachers implemented technology and real-world adaptations into their curriculum. I provided evidence to illustrate my practices and conclusions, including evidence of the transformative learning experiences of participants. In the final chapter, I provide my interpretations of the results and discuss the study's limitations. I also make recommendations for future studies based on the results.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. I interviewed 12 participants to understand how their experiences shaped their viewpoints and practices. In this final chapter, I discuss my interpretations of my findings, the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and the implications of my results.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section, I explain my interpretations of my results. Through my data analysis, I determined that my findings aligned with the themes discovered in the literature review. Additionally, my themes aligned with the elements of the TLT framework. According to Glisczinski (2007), individuals who experience transformative learning are more adept at engaging in knowledge construction and critical thinking when faced with new experiences. Many participants cycled through the four quadrants of the TLT and applied their fresh perspectives and practices to assist students during the pandemic. However, not all participants experienced transformative learning within each theme.

Students Experienced Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Loss During the Pandemic

My results indicated that many students experienced academic and SEL loss during the pandemic, which aligns with the conclusions drawn in the literature review.

My findings showed that participants perceived that their students suffered academic and SEL loss during the pandemic. According to Catalano et al. (2021), insufficient technology was the leading cause of inequality among low-income students during the pandemic. Most participants reported that their students experienced some level of academic learning loss, regardless of access to technology. My findings support Donnelly and Patrinos's (2022) study, which found that students from low-income households experienced more significant learning loss than others. Engzell et al. (2021) added that participants from uneducated homes experienced 60% more learning loss than their peers. Participants from districts with high percentages of students qualifying for free lunch explained that students received watered-down curricula and relaxed standards during the pandemic that led to academic repercussions the following school year.

In addition to being academically hindered, the participants reported that many students experienced social isolation during the pandemic. Previous studies (i.e., Heppen et al., 2017; Nourse, 2019) indicated that online coursework could cause students to feel isolated and disconnected. Even students with access to technology suffered the emotional effects of the pandemic. According to Page et al. (2021), students experienced a loss of connectedness during the pandemic regardless of the actions taken by teachers, which aligns with my conclusion related to virtual coursework. Participants reported that virtual coursework and the necessity of social distancing exacerbated students' feelings of isolation.

Additionally, my findings aligned with Glisczinski's (2007) principles of the TLT. According to Glisczinski, individuals who cycled through all four quadrants of the

TLT were adept at critical thinking and incorporating multiple viewpoints. Participants used critical thinking to analyze the difference between where students were academically and where they should be postpandemic. According to Glisczinski, exploring disparities is imperative in the transformative learning process. Participants' understanding of students' learning loss was necessary to assist them in academics and SEL postpandemic.

Teachers Adapted Relationship-Building Techniques With Students

The participants' responses demonstrated the ways they created relationships with their students during the pandemic and what barriers they faced. My findings aligned with the conclusions of Miller (2021), who stressed the importance of technology in maintaining connections and found that low-income students suffered more isolation than their peers. Additionally, several participants reported that their students had more significant concerns than education, such as safe, stable housing, thus making it difficult for participants to maintain communication with students, which aligns with Grooms and Childs (2021). Participants' perseverance in assisting students supports the findings of Kim and Asbury (2020) and Miller (2021), who concluded that teachers stayed in touch with students by any means necessary. Some participants reached out to students using emails, phone calls, text messages, video messages, and in-person visits to ensure that students knew their teachers cared about them.

The extent to which my findings aligned with Glisczinski's (2007) TLT varied based on the district's technological resources. Participants in districts where students received individual technological devices described success in developing strategies to

communicate with their students during the pandemic and thus experienced more elements of transformative learning. Teachers with technological means to communicate with their students engaged in conversations and trial-and-error strategies to stay connected, aligning with Quadrants II and III of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007). For other districts, the technological barriers prevented relationship building, as many participants said they could not contact their students. Because of these hindrances, participants could not experience transformative learning within this theme.

Students Did Not Prioritize Academics During the Pandemic

Participants' reports that students did not prioritize academics during the pandemic support the conclusions within the literature review. Participants described their students' priorities as finding safe lodging, access to regular meals, and supporting their families. As with Grooms and Childs (2021) and Jones et al. (2021), my findings indicated that many at-risk alternative students faced challenges in their lives that took precedence over education. According to participants, because students' basic needs were unmet, academics were not a priority, which aligns with Kim and Asbury's (2020) conclusions that many at-risk students were vulnerable to negative outside forces during the pandemic, which prevented them from prioritizing education. My findings also align with Mutch and Peung's (2021) conclusions, who found that the pandemic exacerbated the inequalities between low-income students and their peers, which supports my conclusion. My results indicated that participants in higher socioeconomic districts reported higher course completion rates than the participants in lower socioeconomic districts.

My findings also align with the components of my framework. As participants cycled through the quadrants of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007), they adjusted their expectations of educational standards during the pandemic. According to Glisczinski (2007), participants' ability to adapt their perspectives is one of the outcomes of going through the TLT. Rather than adhering to the rigorous academic standards typical before the pandemic, participants incorporated students' viewpoints to understand why students did not complete coursework.

Teachers Implemented Technology and Real-World Adaptations Into Their Curriculum

My findings supported the literature review results concerning the implementation of technology and real-world adaptations. Participants' abilities to provide technological and real-world adaptations to their lessons depended on the school district's technological resources. Participants in districts that provided students with personalized devices aligned with Yan's (2020) recommendations that online learning include meaningful and personal materials. Easterbrook et al. (2022) concluded that at-risk students experienced disproportionate struggles during the pandemic due to technological disadvantages compared to their peers. Many participants could not adapt their lessons due to a lack of technology, and one participant reported that their district did not provide any virtual learning for students.

My findings regarding teachers' curricular adaptations during the pandemic align with the framework of the TLT (Glisczinski, 2007). Participants engaged in critical thinking and exchanged ideas with colleagues to create innovative and technology-driven

lesson adaptations, which align with Quadrants II and III. However, some district's lack of technological resources impeded some participants' progress through the transformative learning cycle as they were unable to incorporate new knowledge into their practices.

Limitations of the Study

In this section, I identify possible limitations of my study related to trustworthiness. A limitation of my study relates to transferability. As I only interviewed 12 participants, the small sample size could limit the study's generalizability. According to Simon and Goes (2013), basic qualitative studies use small numbers of participants that may not reflect the perspectives of the larger population. I attempted to mitigate this by interviewing participants from various locations and backgrounds. However, my study did not represent a large ethnic population and there were many cultures not represented, which does not guarantee that I represented the experience of all alternative teachers in the study. This limitation may present opportunities for future research.

Another limitation I faced was finding enough participants. As my data collection took place over the summer months, it was difficult to reach participants. I found that many teachers did not regularly check their work emails during the summer months, and thus the participants recruited through my partner organization's mailing list was smaller than I expected. A final limitation was that many teachers who taught at alternative schools during the pandemic had since moved to other jobs. Several participants informed me that many of their coworkers during the pandemic had since quit, which made it more difficult to gain participants through snowballing techniques.

Recommendations

Because one of the study's limitations was the small sample size from a specific region of the United States, it would be appropriate to conduct a similar study on a larger scale. Future researchers could also conduct this study to include international teachers and their experiences teaching at-risk students during the pandemic. Expanding the boundaries could assist in gaining information regarding the experiences of different diverse cultural groups that may have had dissimilar experiences during the pandemic. Further, this study only included middle and secondary alternative teachers. Future research could examine the experience of alternative school students during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine how students perceived their experiences.

Future researchers could also use other methodological designs to research alternative schools during the pandemic. Using a case study approach may provide researchers with an in-depth look at how individual schools were affected by the pandemic. A quantitative study could also be employed to understand the effects of the pandemic on a larger population. Researchers could analyze quantitative data to determine the effects that community demographics, such as economic status and geographical location, had on students' success rates during the pandemic.

Implications

The results of my study could provide positive social change by identifying alternative teachers' actions in their efforts to support students virtually. At-risk students suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. My conclusions may inform educators and educational leaders on strategies and procedures to reach at-risk students enrolled at

alternative schools in situations when virtual instruction is necessary, including emergencies, illnesses, and natural disasters.

Additionally, my application of the TLT can help guide educators in how to create positive outcomes from periods of uncertainty. By following the steps of the TLT, teachers can rephrase their scopes of understanding to incorporate new perspectives and generate innovative learning opportunities.

My conclusions support the dichotomy of experiences for teachers and their students based on the district's socioeconomic status. Participants from districts with 80% or more students qualifying for free lunch reported struggling to meet the needs of their students during the pandemic. As Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) discussed, districts received $30 billion during the pandemic for educational emergency relief but did not allocate any of this money to address academic inequalities. To provide equal opportunities across districts, the government should provide more resources to lower income school districts to close the academic learning inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. Lake's (2020) findings support this recommendation, as they concluded that insufficient technology was the leading cause of inequality in low socioeconomic homes. For students to succeed in virtual coursework, reliable internet and devices must become a regular fixture in the classroom, as my participants shared that students' previous experience in online coursework aided them academically during the pandemic. My findings support Page et al.'s (2021) conclusions that at-risk students suffered more significantly than their nonalternative peers during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of the actions taken by the teacher.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the transformative learning experiences of secondary alternative teachers from the South Atlantic region of the United States who shifted from face-to-face to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. I examined the data collection from 12 semistructured interviews with alternative teachers to determine their transformative learning experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conducted this study to explore the actions and perceptions of alternative teachers and how this information could provide positive social change to at-risk students. Most participants' responses indicated that alternative educators struggled to meet the needs of their students during the pandemic and that more protocols need to be in place to assist when virtual education is necessary. However, many participants experienced transformative learning by engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse to develop innovative strategies to engage their students, combat learning loss, and maintain personal connectedness.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study. Could you verify your name and email address for me? Participation in this study is purely voluntary, and the interview may be terminated at any point. This interview will take approximately one hour. Prior to beginning, do you have any questions for me?

To understand how the educational process changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I'd like to get some information on what an average day looked like before the start of the pandemic.

1. Roughly how many students attend your school?
2. What are the top three reasons you feel why students are at your alternative institution?
3. Prior to quarantine, describe an average day at the alternative school.
4. What were the most effective strategies you used to support your students pre-pandemic?
5. Tell me about any training you had for online teaching prior to or during the pandemic?

Now I'd like to discuss how things changed once the pandemic caused schools to switch to virtual learning.

6. Describe what happened at the beginning of quarantine. What was your school's response? Describe how you felt about the process.
7. What were your main concerns at the start of quarantine?

8. What sort of support system did you have during the transition to virtual learning?
9. Explain any conversations or brain-storming dialogues you had with your colleagues or peers about this transition.
10. Explain which strategies worked best in teaching students virtually.
11. How did you recognize when a strategy was not working?
12. Did your students have access to the internet or technology and, if not, what did you/the school district do to circumvent this obstacle?
13. Describe the ways in which you communicated with your students.
14. Explain how your relationship with your students shifted during the pandemic.

Now that the quarantine has been lifted and school is back to in-person, I would like you to reflect on your experiences during this time.

15. To what extent do you feel you were able to meet the educational goals of your students during quarantine?
16. To what extent you feel like you were able to give your students the support they needed?
17. What were the biggest supports and barriers you faced in learning to help your students?
18. What would you have done differently?
19. What do you wish your district and/or the government had done differently?
20. To what extent has quarantine impacted your perception as your role as a teacher?

21. Now that we're back to in-person learning, have you carried over any teaching strategies that you implemented during quarantine? Explain.
22. What/who helped you most in this transition? (Colleagues, trainings, past courses, life experiences, etc.)
23. Where do you see the tensions between online and face-to-face learning?
24. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me?

I will send you out a copy of the transcript for your review. Please let me know within a week if there is anything you would like to amend or add. Is it alright I follow-up with you if I need any clarifications? Thank you again so much for participating.

Appendix B: Interview Questions' Alignment and the Justification for Inclusion

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
1. Roughly how many students attend your school?		(Ewing et al., 2021)		The question is important because, according to Ewing et al. (2021), alternative schools are typically significantly smaller than traditional schools.
2. What are the top three reasons you feel why students are at your alternative institution?		(Aspiranti et al., 2021)	Expert reviewer suggested I change the question from "Why are students at your alternative school?" to "What are the top three reasons you feel students are at your school?" The change in verbiage places influence on the participant's thoughts, as some may not know the exact reason students are at the school.	It is important to understand the individual reasons students enroll in an alternative school as they have unique needs that the alternative school helps to meet (Aspiranti et al., 2021).
3. Prior to quarantine, describe an average day at the alternative school.		(McGee & Lin, 2020)		The structure of alternative schools differs from traditional schools (McGee & Lin, 2020) so it is important to understand what a typical day looked like prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
4. What were the most effective strategies you used to support your students pre-pandemic?		(Bascia & Maton, 2016; Basford et al, 2020; Lea et al., 2019)		This question is important because it is crucial to understand which strategies were being used prior to the pandemic. Alternative schools often employ innovations not typically found in traditional schools (Basford et al., 2020; Bascia & Maton, 2016; Lea et al., 2019).
5. Tell me about any training you had for online teaching prior to or during the pandemic?		(Gudmundsdottr & Hathway, 2020)		As established by Gudmundsdottir and Hathway (2020), most teachers were not prepared to teach virtually, nor were they given sufficient professional development to help them adapt. This question asks participants to reflect on what sort of preparedness they had going into the pandemic for virtual education.
6. Describe what happened at the beginning of quarantine. What was your school's response? Describe how you felt about the process.	Quadrant 1 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			The first quadrant of the TLT deals with people experiencing disorienting dilemmas (Glisczinski, 2007). The quarantine served as the disorienting dilemma where teachers had to rethink their traditional teaching practices. This question is important because it asks participants to reflect upon how people initially reacted and what the process was.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
7. What were your main concerns at the start of quarantine?	Quadrant 1 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway, 2020)		The first quadrant of the TLT deals with people experiencing disorienting dilemmas (Glisczinski, 2007). The quarantine served as the disorienting dilemma where teachers had to rethink their traditional teaching practices. According to Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020), 92% of U.S. and 67% of Norwegian teachers had no prior experience with online teaching and no training in implementing technology. This question is important because it asks participants to reflect on their initially thoughts and concerns when the pandemic necessitated virtual learning.
8. What sort of support system did you have during the transition to virtual learning?	Quadrant 3 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			Quadrant III of the TLT centers around people having dialogues with others to make sense of the disorienting dilemma (Glisczinski, 2007). This question is important as it addresses who participants had for support during this transition.
9. Explain any conversations or brain-storming dialogues you had with your colleagues or peers about this transition.	Quadrant 3 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			Quadrant III of the TLT centers around people having dialogues with others to make sense of the disorienting dilemma (Glisczinski, 2007). This question is important because it addresses what sort of conversations and ideas were shared between the participant and their colleagues.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
10. Explain which strategies worked best in teaching students virtually.	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			Quadrant IV of the TLT occurs once the individual has had time to critically reflect on the situation and to collaborate with others and puts their new ideas into action (Glisczinski, 2007). This question is important because it asks participants to reflect on what actions they took and what worked best.
11. How did you recognize when a strategy was not working?	Quadrant 2/4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			As the TLT is a cycle, individuals may realize that a particular strategy is not working and make changes as needed (Glisczinski, 2007). This question is important as it requires participants to reflect on what strategies were unsuccessful and how they could tell.
12. Did your students have access to the internet or technology and, if not, what did you/the school district do to circumvent this obstacle?		(Catalano et al., 2021)		According to Catalano et al. (2021), one of the biggest problems regarding education during the pandemic was the lack of technology. This caused problems in both completing the assignments and in be able to communicate. This question deals with what actions the individual/district took to problem solve and find new solutions to technology barriers.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
13. Describe the ways in which you communicated with your students.		(Miller, 2021)		This question ties into question 12, which asks teachers to reflect on what actions were taken to communicate with students. As Miller (2021) noted, teachers made phone calls or mailed letters to reach those without internet access but stressed the importance of technology in maintaining their connections with students.
14. Explain how your relationship with your students shifted during the pandemic.		(Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020; Miller, 2021)		According to Miller (2021) and Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020), the well-being of students and maintaining relationships was prioritized over instruction. This question asks participants to reflect on how their roles shifted.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
15. To what extent do you feel you were able to meet the educational goals of your students during quarantine?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Catalano et al., 2021; Lake, 2020)		According to Glisczinski (2007), those who have experienced transformative learning are better able engage in critical thinking and interpret the meaning behind forms of thinking. According to Lake (2020), only one third of districts enforced online teaching or the taking of attendance. Additionally, Catalano et al. (2021)n found that only one third of students in the New York City area did not complete coursework with any regularity. This question asks teachers to reflect on the success of their educational goals for students during the pandemic.
16. To what extent you feel like you were able to give your students the support they needed?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Miller, 2021)		According to Glisczinski (2007), those who have experienced transformative learning are better able engage in critical thinking and interpret the meaning behind forms of thinking. According to Miller (2021), teachers during the pandemic refocused their efforts on maintaining connectedness with their students. This question asks teachers to reflect on their emotional connections with students.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
17. What were the biggest supports and barriers you faced in learning to help your students?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Catalano et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021)		Teachers encountered many barriers in assisting their students during the pandemic: inadequate technology (Catalano et al., 2021), and a lack of engagement (Kim et al., 2021). This question asks participants to reflect on what most helped and hindered their progress with students.
18. What would you have done differently?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			According to Glisczinski (2007), those who have experienced transformative learning are better able engage in critical thinking and interpret the meaning behind forms of thinking. This question asks participants to reflect on what changes they would make if they could do it again.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
19. What do you wish your district and/or the government had done differently?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Trust & Whalen, 2020)		According to Glisczinski (2007), those who have experienced transformative learning are better able engage in critical thinking and interpret the meaning behind forms of thinking. Trust and Whalen (2020) found that participants reported frustrations due to the government's oft changing and uncertain educational directives. Additionally, Grooms and Child (2021) found that participants wished their districts allocated money specifically for the needs of marginalized students. This question asks participants to reflect on what changes they would like the district or government to have made during the pandemic.
20. To what extent has quarantine impacted your perception as your role as a teacher?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Miller, 2021).		According to Miller (2021), This question asks participants to reflect on how they have changed as a teacher due to the COVID-19 pandemic and how they see their roles now vs. then.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
21. Now that we're back to in-person learning, have you carried over any teaching strategies that you implemented during quarantine? Explain.	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			According to Glisczinski (2007), the transition from *knowledge* to *understanding* has the power to foster proactive thinking and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints, which can, in turn, transform one's worldview. This question is important because it asks participants to reflect on and explain how their quarantine teaching habits have affected their in-person teaching.
22. What/who helped you most in this transition? (Colleagues, trainings, past courses, life experiences, etc.)	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)	(Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020).		According to Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) and Trust and Whalen (2020), schools did not adequately prepare teachers for the online switch, with participants relying on informal self-directed training to adapt to the necessary technology. This question is important because it asks participants to reflect on what they found most helpful in transitioning to virtual learning during the pandemic.

Interview question	TLT	Literature review	Content expert	Justification
23. Where do you see the tensions between online and face-to-face learning?	Quadrant 4 (Glisczinksi, 2007)			According to Glisczinski (2007), the transition from *knowledge* to *understanding* has the power to foster proactive thinking and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints, which can, in turn, transform one's worldview. This question is important because it asks participants to describe what they feel the biggest differences are between virtual and face-to-face learning.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

On the day of the interviews, I will:

- Double the check the audio-recorder to ensure it is working properly
- Have a reflexive journal and graphic organizer, as well as several writing utensils, for notes
- Be prepared to start on time

Before Starting the Interview:

- Ask participants to confirm their identity
- Thank participants for participating
- Remind participants of the consent form agreements
- Remind participants that participation is voluntary, and the interview may be terminated at any point

At the End of the Interview:

- Thank participants again for participating
- Send transcripts and audio of the recording to the participant for transcript checking

Appendix D: Coding Definitions

Code	Definition
Adapting lessons to real-life issues	Teachers adapted their lessons to include real-life issues.
Assignments online	Students completed assignments online.
Checking in	Teachers checked in with students during the pandemic.
Communication with students	Teachers communicated with students during the pandemic.
Communications with parents	Teachers communicated with parents during the pandemic.
Emotional repercussions	Students suffered emotional repercussions because of the pandemic.
Expressing concerns about students	Teachers were concerned about the well-being of students during the pandemic.
Familial deaths	Students experienced deaths of family and loved ones.
Google classroom	Teachers incorporated the Google Classroom app into their lessons.
Homelessness	Students experienced homelessness and/or unstable living conditions.
Hunger	Students struggled to find regular meals.
Including technology into lessons	Teachers adapted lessons to include technology.
Inspiring students	Teachers worked to inspire students to stay engaged during the pandemic.
Instability during COVID	Students experienced homelessness, unemployment, hunger, or other basic necessities.
Interventions	Teachers used academic and behavioral interventions for their students.
Lack of communication	Teachers were unable to communicate with students.
Lack of value on education	Students did not value academic learning.
Learning gaps postCOVID	Students experienced academic learning loss during the pandemic which created gaps in their knowledge.
Maintaining connections with students	Teachers worked to maintain emotional connections with students during the pandemic.
Necessity of flexibility and adaptation	Teachers needed to be flexible in their expectations for the students and adapt their lessons as needed.

Code	Definition
Need for SEL	Students' experiences during the pandemic led to the need for social-emotional learning interventions.
No parental buy-in	Students' parents did not value their children's academics.
Not meeting students' goals	Teachers felt they were unable to provide adequate academic instruction.
Passing kids through	Many students were passed through courses without earning grades.
Poverty	Students experienced poverty during the pandemic due to the loss of their parents' jobs.
Relating to students	Teachers found ways to relate to their students during the pandemic.
Relationship with students	Teachers worked to maintain relationships with students during the pandemic.
Safe space during COVID	Students did not have a safe space to live and/or complete online coursework during the pandemic.
Student engagement	Teachers worked to engage students in coursework during the pandemic.
Students don't think they can fail	Students did not think they would be failed during the pandemic.
Students not completing work	Students did not complete assignments during the pandemic.
Students not showing up for Zoom	Students did not attend Zoom sessions during the pandemic.
Students struggling to adapt back to in-person learning	Students struggled to adapt back to in-person learning from virtual learning after the pandemic.
Technology	Teachers incorporated technology into their lessons.
Tiktok	Teachers incorporate the tiktok app into their lessons.
Truancy	Students did not show up to classes.
Unsafe situations	Students were in unsafe environments d
Unstable home lives	Students did not have safe home lives.
Zoom	Teachers used Zoom to hold virtual class sessions with students.