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Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Perspectives of Teaching Social-Emotional Skills During the COVID-19 Pandemic Virtual Learning Period

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Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2008

BS, Concord University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Early Childhood Special Education

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood special education teachers struggled to virtually teach social-emotional skills to their students when schools were closed, and all students were moved from face-to-face to virtual learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was used as the conceptual framework for this study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 10 early childhood special education teachers from the United States who had experience with teaching social-emotional skills virtually during the COVID-19 school closure period. Using open coding, the thematic analysis yielded three themes which summarized how teachers; (a) noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, and (c) require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills virtually. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing teachers, administrators, and professional development creators with special education teachers' perspectives on their successes and challenges of teaching virtually so policies and training can be adjusted to improve social-emotional teaching strategies.

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Dedication

I dedicate this completed work to my boys, Liam and Maddox. Unknowingly to you, you were my motivators throughout this journey. This final copy is dedicated to both of you to serve as your reminder that you *can* do hard things. I apologize for the time I took away from our family to complete this work. You recognized that I was working, and you respected my space when I needed it; I just hate that it took time away from you. I love you both so, so, so incredibly much, and I hope this inspires you to accomplish anything you wish for in life.

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To my dad, and one of my biggest cheerleaders, Steve: Thank you for believing in me and supporting me. I love you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 global pandemic on March 12, 2020 (Mahmood, 2021). Schools across the world, including early childhood special education programs, were closed as COVID-19 cases spread. Virtual learning was set up to fill the face-to-face learning gap in most regions (Karp & McGowen, 2020; Yildirim, 2021). In-person interactions were not available to students, and they were not able to engage in developmentally appropriate social-emotional skill activities such as hugs, handshakes, or other means of displaying close contact or physical affection. Bassok et al. (2021) noted that during this time, some early childhood education teachers adjusted their typical routines and reduced class sizes. Most schools were closed indefinitely, and teachers provided virtual instruction as opposed to face-to-face learning (Bassok et al., 2021). Teachers reported difficulty engaging students, modeling social-emotional skills, and teaching in general when teaching virtually (Bassok et al., 2021). Though specific instructional strategies were used by early childhood special teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period, at the time of the current study, details of these strategies had not been reported (Steed & Leech, 2021). This study's findings may be used by teachers, administrators, and professional development coordinators to adjust policy and training to improve teaching strategies during current and future school closures to improve student learning and social-emotional skills.

In this chapter, I present background information for the study, as well as the study's problem statement and research question. I discuss the purpose of the study,

describe the nature of the study, and clarify definitions of terms pertinent to the study. The theoretical framework for the study is addressed. I also explain the study's nature, assumptions, scope, and limitations, followed by a closing summary.

Background

In the past, schools closed due to natural phenomena leading to long-term educational breaks for students. Between 2010 and 2019, children's homes, schools, and communities were affected by 119 natural disasters in the United States (Lai & Greca, 2020; Smith, 2020). Researchers looked at how Hurricane Katrina negatively affected many students, leaving them without housing and access to public education services, and researchers found that students suffered from depression and a lack of focus after their return to school (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Picou & Marshall, 2007). Many schools continue to use virtual learning when teachers have monthly professional development, during illness outbreaks, and during times of inclement weather and/or natural disasters when it is not safe to travel.

Although academics are a critical area of focus in the early childhood development domain, students' social-emotional skills also represent an important concern within early childhood development. In preschoolers, positive social-emotional skills are linked to positive behaviors such as making and retaining friendships and engaging appropriately in social situations (Murano et al., 2020). Positive social-emotional skills and low aggression in preschoolers have been associated with enhanced academic achievement (Murano et al., 2020). Nurturing and emotionally supportive teachers are essential for the development of social-emotional skills in students (Kalland

& Linnavalli, 2022). Teachers can support students by helping them to regulate their feelings through using language, thinking about their feelings, and identifying their emotions (Kalland & Linnavelli, 2022).

Due to the history of negative effects on mental health when students are away from the classroom, it is imperative to focus on young children's social-emotional skills in the context of virtual learning. Bassok et al. (2021) and Carr (2020) discovered that early childhood teachers struggled with virtual instruction in important skills such as those in the social-emotional domain. Kaden (2020) stated that further information about virtual learning is needed from teachers to generate guidance and support for students with special needs. Glessner and Johnson (2020) found that special education teachers initially struggled with virtual instruction and teaching their students effectively. Teachers found that technology and resources provided by administration and their peers offered them support in modifying and adapting to virtual instruction (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). In the current study, early childhood special education teachers who taught social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic provided their perspectives on teaching these skills in the virtual learning setting.

Problem Statement

Virtual teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic produced unique challenges for early childhood special education teachers. Early childhood special education teachers struggled to teach students age-appropriate social-emotional skills in this context (Bassok et al., 2021; Carr, 2020). Shin and Puig (2021) found that early childhood teachers struggled to create ideas and plans for students that were engaging and appropriate for

virtual learning. Participants' low levels of self-efficacy were concerning when virtually teaching students with special needs. Shin and Puig stated that additional research was necessary for teachers to address teachers' concerns and understand their perspectives on the lessons and activities during the COVID-19 virtual learning period. J. Chen and Garcia (2023) reported that teachers struggled to implement developmentally appropriate activities in the virtual setting. A teacher in one study reported that a lack of resources for implementing social-emotional learning activities was a barrier needed to feel more confident (Jomaa et al., 2023). J. Chen and Badolato (2023) had similar findings and noted that students from impoverished backgrounds were negatively affected due to a lack of home resources as a means for social-emotional learning support. Teachers were challenged with teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period, but there was no literature to date that addressed teachers' perceptions. Understanding teachers' perspectives of virtually teaching social-emotional skills to students may help inform early childhood special education stakeholders and policymakers of successes and challenges so future decisions can be made about virtual learning.

Researchers examined the views of parents and early childhood special education teachers on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' social-emotional health (Stites et al., 2021). However, there was a lack of research on early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, representing a gap in the literature.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to students during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Education stakeholders may use the findings from this study to understand how early childhood special education teachers taught students social-emotional skills through virtual learning environments. I used Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory to obtain newly constructed information on teachers' perspectives. This information may be used to support teachers during future events that force them to rely on and teach students' social-emotional skills virtually.

Research Question

What are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study was framed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which indicates that the teaching of social-emotional skills to children is crucial because their development relies on social-emotional interactions with peers and adults (see Verenikina, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) theorized that children gain information through observing and social interactions with others. In the early childhood special education classroom, this process may be facilitated by instructional practices that involve modeling by a teacher or peers. The development of social-emotional skills is dependent on children getting assistance from adults or more capable peers where children require assistance from adults or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The

foundation of this theory lies in the acquisition of language and the role of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Verenikina, 2003) contended that development happens in social and cultural contexts, with the social context being the people who surround an individual. Liu (2024) determined that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, a guided process of acquiring new skills, can be applied in the virtual environment. Porter et al. (2021) posited that one way the sociocultural theory is supported in the virtual environment is through collaboration opportunities where the teacher encourages peer interactions.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, early childhood special education teachers were unable to participate in in-person learning opportunities, hindering any interpersonal social experiences among peers and teachers. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory suggested that students rely on interpersonal activities with teachers and peers to build social-emotional skills. The goal of the current study was to explore how early childhood special education teachers taught social-emotional skills to their students during the virtual learning period when in-person opportunities did not exist. Because early childhood special education teachers were incapable of providing in-person learning opportunities for students, teachers were tasked with designing innovative ways to deliver social-emotional skills to their students. Kamei and Harriott (2021) reported that teachers developed several types of virtual social-emotional skill activities, including student check-in discussions, assigning videos for student viewing, encouraging applause and affirmation, and playing modified games with teachers and peers. Vygotsky's belief was that students require guidance to learn, so the sociocultural

theory supports that students can increase their social-emotional skills when interacting with their peers and teachers virtually.

I used the sociocultural theory to analyze challenges and successes through interpreting the teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills virtually. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was applied to understand how children obtain their knowledge from interactions with peers and adults. The sociocultural theory indicates that student learning is not purely psychological; it is a process facilitated by experiences and activities such as interaction (Hughes, 2021; Vygotsky, 1986). The interview questions in the current study were designed based on the foundation of the sociocultural theory to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of virtually teaching social-emotional skills to their students. In Chapter 2, I provide a more detailed explanation of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as it relates to teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to early childhood special needs students in the virtual setting.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative researchers attempt to understand groups or individuals in natural settings by investigating personal experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that qualitative inquiry is based on practical interest in studying perspectives, views, and experiences in the world. Open-ended discussion produces more in-depth information than a written interview could (Bengtsson, 2016). To gain more in-depth information in the current study, I explored individual participants' perspectives through semistructured interviews. All 10 semistructured interviews were one-on-one

interviews with participants that lasted around 60 minutes per interview. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the data for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to report patterns in data (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis was applied to guide the open and axial coding process to identify emerging themes.

Researchers who complete qualitative studies appreciate the subjective interpretations of their participants' experiences of a particular event (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The research question in the current study was designed to address experiences that early childhood special education teachers had while teaching their students social-emotional skills in a virtual setting. Ravitch and Carl (2016) expressed that it is essential to explore individual participants' experiences so that comparisons of those experiences can be made to ensure a fuller understanding of a phenomenon. Teachers discussed various experiences regarding the virtual learning period. Follow-up questions were designed to gain more in-depth understanding and context about the participants' experiences.

Merriam (2009) affirmed that researchers should be interested in learning about how people interpret their experiences and the meanings that they give to their experiences. The intention of the current study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to their students during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were 10 early childhood special education teachers in the United States who taught students social-emotional skills virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited

from the Walden University Participant Pool and through early childhood special education social media groups for teachers. Snowball sampling was also used to locate other qualified and interested participants.

Definitions

Definitions of key concepts used throughout this study are listed in this section:

COVID-19: The WHO (2020) defined COVID-19 as a new virus that was first reported on December 31, 2019, following cases of a "viral pneumonia" in Wuhan, China. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared that the COVID-19 virus was a global pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). The most common symptoms of the virus are mild: fever, cough, and tiredness; however, in some cases, death is a result of this virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025).

Early childhood special education: Gwinnett County Schools (2025) in Georgia defined this as a specialized area of early childhood education in which students with special educational needs are served a rich and challenging education experience through an individualized education plan. Each state in the United States determines policies and procedures for this field, but students are typically served by an early childhood special education teacher from age 3 through age 8 in a public school system.

Social-emotional skills: Skills within the social-emotional domain at the early childhood level that involves the child's self and relationship skills; this can also include awareness, management, and responsibility (Kamei & Harriott, 2021).

Virtual learning: Also known as *online learning* or *e-learning*, virtual learning is the accessing of a classroom through a digital platform that is mediated through a form of technology such as an iPad or computer (Khamidzhanovna & Rakhmatullaevna, 2022).

Assumptions

There were two assumptions in this study. The first assumption was that all early childhood special education teachers who participated would answer questions willfully and honestly. All candidates provided their consent to take part in the confidential interview via an emailed invitation to the study. I assumed that participants' answers reflected their true perspectives and experiences about their time teaching virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second assumption was that my previous experiences as an early childhood special education teacher would not have a negative effect on the study. I maintained anecdotal notes in a journal to ensure that only factual content was included, and my beliefs and perspectives were excluded.

Significance

This study may be significant as school systems continue to navigate the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and consider the role of virtual learning in early childhood special education programs. This study may be significant in providing insight into early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to students during the virtual learning period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study may contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen preparedness for future school disruptions, supporting teacher well-being and ensuring students receive high-quality developmentally appropriate educational opportunities in the virtual learning

environment. The study findings may offer valuable information for education stakeholders regarding the challenges teachers encountered and successful strategies that were used to teach students' social-emotional skills in the virtual learning environment. Understanding early childhood special education teachers' positive and negative experiences may contribute to positive social change for administrators, teachers, parents, and students who participate in teaching and learning social-emotional skills in the virtual learning setting. The results of this study may provide insight into how teachers successfully taught social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The participants' experiences included in this study may provide meaningful evidence for early childhood special education administrators, teachers, and parents of students if students are forced to learn virtually again in the future.

Limitations

This qualitative study had three limitations. The first limitation involved recognizing and avoiding my personal bias as a former early childhood special education teacher. To avoid any bias, I used a reflective journal to organize data notes. The data notes included objective evidence collected from participants' interview sessions. A second limitation was the participants' schedule and activities. Teachers who are often overworked may have refused participation in extra activities such as this study. To address this, I used the Walden University Participant Pool as well as social media outlets where early childhood special education teachers are present. I also used the snowball sampling method to reach data saturation. The third limitation was the participants'

willingness to share their perspectives honestly. To address this limitation, I ensured that participants were aware that their identities would be kept confidential.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood special education teachers who taught social-emotional skills to students in the virtual learning setting due to the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic meant teachers were expected to teach students in the virtual setting with little to zero training. Because early childhood students' social-emotional development relies on interactions with peers and adults, early childhood special education teachers were challenged with serving their students virtually. The participants' experiences provided meaningful insight into the successes and challenges of teaching social-emotional skills to students virtually. This evidence may inform early childhood special education stakeholders, including administrators and parents of students, of challenging encounters and successful strategies that were used during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings may be used as a guide to support teachers and administrators during school closures to improve students social-emotional skills if students are forced to learn virtually again.

In Chapter 1, I identified the problem, provided background information, and noted the importance of teaching social-emotional skills to students at the early development level. This information was associated with the struggles that teachers experienced as they taught their students in a virtual environment through the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed. The study's purpose, research question, theoretical

framework, assumptions, and limitations were outlined in Chapter 1. Definitions of key terms were also provided. In Chapter 2, the literature review strategy is explained, and a thorough description of the theoretical framework is included. Chapter 2 also includes a review of the literature linked to key concepts in the study, with a synthesis of relevant studies from recent literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Early childhood special education students and their teachers encountered unique challenges with mandatory school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and teachers were forced to combine teaching and learning into a virtual learning setting, excluding any in-person interactions from their daily routines. Early childhood special education teachers struggled to teach students social-emotional skills through virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bassok et al., 2021). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Teachers' perspectives were explored through one-on-one semistructured interviews.

After a discussion of the theoretical framework, this chapter includes a review of the recent literature on early childhood special education teachers' experiences of virtual learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. A description of the search strategies used in conducting the literature review and an explanation on the theoretical framework are included. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, materials that were related to early childhood special education teachers' perspectives, early childhood social-emotional skills, and early childhood special education during the COVID-19 pandemic were reviewed. Various resource channels on virtual learning, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, internet searches, and dissertations, were reviewed. Peer-reviewed journal articles were

located and reviewed using several databases in Walden University's library. The information from peer-reviewed journal articles in my literature search was published between 2018 and 2023. Primary and secondary source searches included EBSCO, SAGE Publishing, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Taylor and Francis Online, and Google Scholar. The following keywords were used in searching for relevant articles: *early childhood special education*, *early childhood special education teachers' perspectives*, *preschool special education*, *social-emotional skills*, *COVID-19*, and *virtual learning*. Boolean phrases were used to assist in finding relevant literature.

The literature review for this study begins by exploring scholarly articles on early childhood special education teachers' perspectives about teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section provides an understanding of challenges these teachers faced, including teaching social-emotional skills, in their planning and instruction throughout the virtual learning period. Understanding the obstacles that early childhood special education teachers encountered during the virtual learning period helps illustrate why this topic is significant. This understanding also creates an awareness for the prevention of these obstacles should students be expected to learn via the virtual setting in the future.

Theoretical Foundation

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was the theoretical foundation of this study. Sociocultural theory is an approach to learning grounded in the belief that children gain knowledge through their social interactions with peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Cherry, 2022) noted that human interactions vary from culture to culture and that students can achieve further knowledge through social-

emotional skill activities with guidance from a more knowledgeable source. Sociocultural theory suggests that society and the groups people belong to are strong influencers of their human development and behaviors (Rahmatirad, 2020).

The *more knowledgeable other* (MKO), the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), *social interactions*, and *scaffolding* are four major concepts of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The first, MKO, is based on the concept that an individual who is more experienced and skilled at a task can guide a learner in acquiring new information (Drew, 2022). The MKO could be a more knowledgeable peer, teacher, older sibling, parent, or other individual who can act as a guide for learning (Drew, 2022). Programmable electronic games, such as computer games, can act as the MKO if they are programmed with more knowledge about the topic than the learner knows (Mcleod, 2022). The second concept, ZPD, as it relates to early childhood education, is the amount of information between what a child currently knows and the information the child does not know but is capable of learning with guidance of a MKO (Cherry, 2022). The ZPD is the difference between a child's actual development and their potential development when they have guidance from a MKO (Vygotsky, 1978). The third concept, social interactions, was viewed by Vygotsky as being critical for the learner and the MKO (Cherry, 2021). For learning to take place, an adult is respected as an MKO; however, Vygotsky's belief was that there was strength in peer learning (Cherry, 2021). The fourth concept, scaffolding, is a term used to describe building onto knowledge when the child is in the ZPD with the MKO who assists via an activity, aid, or resource (Cherry, 2021).

Since the closing of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic, research about the virtual learning environment has emerged. Izci et al. (2022) posited that the virtual learning environment is supported through sociocultural theory. In their study, teachers supplied parents and caregivers with activities to support kindergarteners in completing their work and supporting them in their activities as the MKO. Though students purportedly missed being in school with peers and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and caregivers were facilitators for their child's activities, designating them as the MKO while virtual learning took place (Izci et al., 2022). Authors Amrullah and Nanzah (2022) suggested that the sociocultural theory is achieved when teachers and their students' relationship help the student to learn and achieve learning goals. In the context of virtual learning, the framework provided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory designates the teacher or parent is in the essential role as the MKO. As schools were forced to be closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood special education students were unable to participate in face-to-face social-emotional skill activities with classmates, making it challenging to socialize with their teachers and classmates (J. Chen & Adams, 2022).

According to the sociocultural theory, the social environment is a substantial portion of developing the child's consciousness, personality, and their relationship with reality (Irshad et al., 2021). By understanding what early childhood special education teachers' perspectives are in relation to teaching social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, this evidence can contribute to the growing information on teaching students successfully within the virtual environment.

Many of the technologies people use today did not exist when Vygotsky designed the sociocultural theory, making it essential to continue constructing knowledge about learning in different contexts. In keeping with Vygotsky's belief that children learn from social interactions with the guidance of an adult, the sociocultural theory can be applied to the virtual learning environment if the learner is being guided by an effective MKO (Drew, 2022). Vygotsky's (1978) belief was that learning is a process that takes place socially as children construct knowledge from their culture through shared learning opportunities.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Early Childhood Special Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Early childhood special education is a specialized field that involves early intervention to increase developmental skills that assist in meeting specialized outcomes to improve their quality of life (Movahedazarhouligh, 2021). Early childhood special education is federally mandated school for children with disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities Act, or IDEA (Batz & Yadav, 2023). Early childhood special education is an educational intervention provided at a crucial time in a child's early learning development, typically between birth and eight years old. The public school system in the United States is responsible for educating early childhood special education students to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education, or FAPE. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a typical early childhood special education student would receive educational services in a face-to-face classroom among their peers. After schools

were forced to close in March 2020, early childhood special education teachers and students had to access their school through the virtual setting (Gomez et al., 2020).

Early childhood special education teachers' work was substantially affected during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period and teachers suffered negative effects on their mental health (Gomez et al., 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood special education teachers reported high levels of stress in their jobs to meet strict standards, assess students regularly and differentiate the curriculum, among other stressors (Walter et al., 2022). Walter et al. (2022) reported that teacher retention is of significant concern and school district administrators should focus on addressing teacher well-being. With the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers became concerned about their own health, and studies showed that the sudden transition to the virtual learning setting was linked to higher levels of psychological stress (Kwon et al., 2022). Teachers reported feelings of helplessness in not being able to support their students effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period (Steed et al., 2022). Shin and Puig (2021) found that teachers were initially not confident in their skills to work with students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Researchers reported that teachers and school leaders stated that there was a lack of policy guidance from the local and central government, making it difficult to know what the expectations for virtual learning were (Lacey et al., 2024).

In March and April 2020, the Office for Civil Rights issued an official notice detailing how schools could maintain compliance with special education law while providing virtual instruction to students. As the law mandates, all students are permitted

to receive Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), regardless of their ability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood special education teachers had an obligation to fulfil the requirements of their students' Individualized Education Program (IEP), even though students were not in the face-to-face learning environment (Office for Civil Rights, 2020). Steed et al. (2022) stated that some districts implemented formal temporary Distance Learning Plans (DLPs) to remain compliant with the law. The U. S. Department of Education issued an order that student IEPs could be changed to a DLP to make provisions to educational services that fit virtual learning needs (2020). A DLP is an IEP that has been converted to fit the needs of students within the virtual setting (Steed et al, 2022). Some teachers reported that DLPs were a daunting task with new requirements and amendments that left them feeling overwhelmed (Glessner & Johnson, 2020).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were dedicated to remaining compliant to the IDEA by completing student IEPs via virtual IEP meetings. Some teachers felt that IEP meetings held virtually ran more quickly and efficiently than in-person meetings, and this was well received by parents (Steed et al, 2022). In some cases, students' IEPs were modified to remove social skill goals that were no longer attainable after the switch to virtual learning (Hurwitz et al, 2022). Hurwitz et al (2022) reported that changes were made within the IEP to allow interventions to be delivered through a multitude of different ways (virtual, hybrid, in-person). Other teachers reported that measurement of the goals and objectives and evaluation of what students learned was almost non-existent (Karnas et al, 2023).

Many parents and caregivers in the home became the MKO during the virtual learning period, so it is noteworthy to understand their experiences. Parents reported spending more time together as a family during the pandemic lockdown, specifically mentioning going on walks since parks and stores were mostly closed (Goldschmidt, 2020). The closure of schools happened suddenly; however, early on, many parents reportedly put a priority on family health and safety before education as they balanced new obligations (Garbe et al, 2020). Once virtual learning became the standard, many parents struggled getting acclimated to the new norm. There were some parents who did not feel as if they were effective in teaching their children with special needs leading to a frustrating barrier for them (Garbe et al., 2020). Other parents expressed that there were positive implications that surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as one parent explained that their child's seizures lessened presumably because of the fewer demands being placed on her child through virtual learning (Harkins et al, 2022). Some parents faced obstacles like not having the time and materials on hand to complete the activities suggested by teachers (Sonnenschein & Stites, 2021). Other parents felt overworked and stressed by their own personal demands, while also being required to engage in social activities with their children, so this was not always seen as an effective strategy (Plotka & Guirguis, 2022). Cheung et al. (2024) reported that parents should be provided with adequate resources and workshops for parents who are supporting their children with virtual learning. Parents also began to request that students meet in online group rooms for their children to have social interactions with their peers (Stites et al, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected early childhood special education students and their families (Timmons et al., 2021). Some families with children having special needs reported feeling disconnected with their children emotionally due to being confined at home with no other outlet or support (Hochman et al., 2022). Parents' responsibilities were stretched with the addition of implementing activities to their children for their teachers (Timmons et al., 2021). In one study, parents shared that they had to learn to balance their own professional and home lives to help their child (Timmons et al., 2021). Parents struggled to balance work and home life balance while supporting their children during the virtual learning period with no training and poorly designed lesson plans (Fontenelle-Tereschuck, 2023).

Parents raised concerns that virtual learning increased screentime for their children (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Parents of some special education students in preschool felt that virtual learning was not appropriate for this age group as they should be interactively socializing and playing with their peers (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Researchers have revealed that excessive screentime decreases time with nature and outdoor activities, but it is also linked to sleep problems, obesity, anxiety, and depression (Muppalla et al., 2023). Researchers reported that one parent felt that virtual learning was traumatic for their son and that he, among others, was not receiving a FAPE because the virtual learning format was not an appropriate setting for learning (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). Sonnenschein et al. (2022) noted that more research is needed on how to effectively provide virtual learning activities to early childhood special education students to best support them in that setting.

Studies have revealed that parents shared which experiences were positive to them about the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Some parents reported that being together as a family unit gave them a renewed sense of appreciation for the family unit (Hochman et al., 2022). Parents from recent studies have reported that there were benefits to virtual learning. Parents stated that their children were able to thrive on self-paced lessons and the distractions from peers were removed in the virtual setting (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022). Some parents also shared that they were able to understand their child's learning abilities better after being home during the lockdown (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022).

Early Childhood Special Education Teachers' Perspectives

Early childhood special education teachers experienced both negative and positive effects from the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period (Gomez et al., 2020). Glessner and Johnson (2020) posited that teachers initially struggled with anxiety and overwhelming feelings as well as excessive worrying with the sudden switch and no end in sight. Teachers questioned the unknown, including how long it would be before schools reopened, how they would meet IEP mandates, and how they would meet their students' needs (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Teachers struggled due to their lack of experience and training in virtual instruction, making them feel insufficient as teachers (Ethridge et al., 2022). Teachers reported that they were forced to teach virtually, but they were challenged with learning how to use new, digital platforms with no prior experience (Goudarzi et al., 2023). These obstacles were additional contributors to the mental strains that teachers were feeling since prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers revealed that they were able to find some positive aspects during their time during the virtual learning period. The extensive use of technology and tools during this time increased teacher knowledge of these skills that was extended beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Li & Yu, 2022). Teachers reported that they enjoyed being able to spend more time at home with their families and less time on the road for work during the virtual learning period (Gomez et al., 2022). Other teachers reported that some students increased their attention span, and others were able to successfully master their IEP goals (Karnas et al., 2022). Teachers revealed that an advantage to virtual learning was an increase in their own free time (Ganji et al., 2024).

Initially, early childhood special education teachers' relationships with their students' parents were challenged when efficient communication avenues became limited with the move to virtual instruction (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). A study by Phillips et al. (2024) revealed that the number one struggle mentioned by New Zealand teachers, and second by United States teachers, was being disconnected from their students. Until Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and other video chat applications, or apps, were available, teachers relied on making phone calls to check in with their students, and this was not always successful (Fettig et al., 2022). Teachers reported using email, texting, video conferencing, web portal platforms, and phone calls as their means of communicating with parents of students during the virtual learning period (Carpenter & Dunn, 2023). Once teachers found communication tools to implement with parents of students, they acclimated and felt more comfortable as time went on (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Additional concerns from teachers included being required to troubleshoot technical

issues brought up by parents like recovering forgotten passwords or uploading student work to the virtual platform (Spadafora et al., 2022).

As part of the new norm, teachers were expected to take on a parent coaching role with no prior training in parent coaching strategies (Schuck et al., 2021). *Coaching* is a term used to describe the indirect services teachers were offering to their students as the parents and caregivers became the primary MKO (Steed et al., 2022). Though teachers were charged with coaching parents through the virtual learning period, they found this to positively affect family relationships and build closer relationships (Gomez et al., 2020). Not everyone was a supporter of this strategy; some teachers liked that they were able to provide individual services for their students through the parent coaching strategy (Steed et al., 2022). Parents were both aware of and burdened by the teacher role they had taken on when given coaching strategies by teachers (Fettig et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers provided play activities to the parents of students to engage in the activities with their children at home (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). Still, teachers reported that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected students' social-emotional skills with the lack of socialization for students (Düzyol & Yıldırım, 2022). Some families had limited or no access to technology, or they were unable to navigate the new virtual learning platforms (Fettig et al., 2022). Meisner and McKenzie (2023) reported that many students did not have access to the virtual learning platforms, so they were unable to be taught; however, they suggested that the United States government should implement new policies that address student access to tools for virtual learning. Some parents were unable to assist their children with virtual learning due to

their own work or personal commitments, leading to missed learning opportunities for students (Gayatri, 2020). Researchers described teachers' difficulties with technology after the switch to virtual learning, yet over time they were able to improve on these admitted shortcomings (Jones, 2020).

Researchers have shown that early childhood special education teachers spent more time planning and providing instruction, communicating with families, and conducting virtual meetings with students than the general education early childhood teachers during the virtual learning period (Steed & Leech, 2021). Teachers also reported a lack of appropriate training for implementing virtual lessons and evidence suggests that ongoing training for teachers is necessary to continue to improve their virtual instruction skillset (Ford et al., 2020). To make up for the lack of training, teachers were self-teaching the use of educational virtual and social platforms, though not all teachers reported having the time to self-teach (Starks & Reich, 2023). Early childhood special education students were sometimes not a top priority for education if they had an older sibling with a need for accessing their virtual learning lessons simultaneously (Steed & Leech, 2021). Parents and teachers reported that students did not receive as much direct instructional time during the virtual learning period (Fettig et al., 2022). These types of hardships posed a negative effect on the students as they were unable to receive the services they required through no fault of their own.

Early Childhood Special Education and Social-Emotional Skills

Social-emotional skills are critical in early childhood development (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). In the United States, where children typically attend public schools for

education, it is common for students to participate in imaginary role-play social-emotional activities in the early childhood classroom, allowing for student collaboration to act out parts of their culture amongst their peers (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Vygotsky believed that these pretend play activities strengthened development in abstract thinking and self-regulation in early childhood (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Vygotsky argued that adults offer children ways to interpret and respond to the world through their culture (Mcleod, 2022). Though face-to-face educational opportunities existed for teachers and students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers could not apply these types of social-emotional skill activities with the implementation of virtual learning.

Teachers and parents both reported the feeling that it was as important to address students' social-emotional skills as it was to address academic skills during the virtual learning period (Stites et al., 2021). Teachers stated that they felt reading a book virtually to students was an effective strategy, while parents were less likely to agree (Plotka & Guirguis, 2022). Other teachers expressed that reenacting a scene from a story using puppets was an effective teaching strategy, but they stated that reenactments with puppets could be exhausting to implement (J. Chen & Adams, 2022). Teachers also served their students indirectly by providing social-emotional activities to the parents to complete with their children in their own time, asynchronously (Sonnenschein & Stites, 2021). In another study by Sonnenschein et al. (2022), the authors revealed that 56% of teachers sent home written instructions with activities attached to complete with their children. Though teachers have acknowledged the importance of social-emotional skills and

development, there is no literature that has explored their perspectives of teaching these skills virtually to their students.

Children's experiences influence their later years' social-emotional competence whether positive or negative (Rakap et al., 2018). In an early childhood special education classroom, the caregiver provides a nurturing, safe environment that promotes positive social-emotional skills (Egan et al., 2021). The safe, nurturing learning environment was not possible while students were being taught virtually. Some students struggled to make progress on social-emotional skills during the virtual instruction period, while teachers struggled to teach these skills (J. Chen & Adams, 2022). Plotka and Guirguis (2023) reported that the virtual environment is better for growth of academic skills than social-emotional skills that require social interactions and play activities.

Researchers have reported that students with deficits in the social-emotional skills domain are more likely to display undesirable and challenging behaviors, leading to being at-risk of failing school and ultimately turning to a life of crime (Rakap et al., 2018). Students with social-emotional deficits may exhibit externalized behaviors when they are frustrated or upset, like hitting or kicking; however, some students may demonstrate internalized behaviors, such as being socially withdrawn or anxious (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2022). Internalized or externalized undesired behaviors are similarly concerning as they both contribute to negative student learning behaviors (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2022). Sun et al. (2022) stated that, early in the pandemic, parents described students as exhibiting more externalized behaviors, though internalized behaviors are more difficult to identify. In one study, parents stated that externalized

behaviors in children rose 16.5% during the pandemic, while internalized behaviors rose 12.1% (Feinberg et al., 2022). Though researchers reported that families prioritized their social-emotional well-being over instructional time during the COVID-19 virtual learning period by reducing their children's time in the virtual setting (Kelly et al., 2023).

Watts and Pattnaik (2022) noted that parents expressed that their children experienced some level of social deprivation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same regard, parents also noted that their child's happiness diminished during the pandemic and depression and trauma set in (Watts & Pattnaik, 2022). Egan et al. (2021) reported that parents were concerned with their children's present social-emotional development as well as later development. Parents were concerned with the lack of peer interactions and missed peer relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period (Egan et al., 2021).

Early Childhood Special Education and Virtual Learning

Virtual learning may also be referred to as distance learning, digital learning, e-learning, remote learning, or online learning. This newer educational environment takes place in a digital format on an electronic device such as a laptop or an iPad. Students may also be enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school but take their classes in the virtual format (Bergdahl, & Hietajärvi, 2022). Jones (2020) mentioned that many children have had previous access to iPhone technology apps like FaceTime, so the use of these types of technology was not a foreign concept to many children's experiences before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, being required to learn via one of these devices was unique to the virtual learning period.

Peer interactions were severely limited when face-to-face educational opportunities did not exist, and early childhood special education students were expected to access their educational environment virtually. Researchers found that it was essential that students had adult assistance for virtual instructional purposes due to their age and capability to log on and input passwords (Spadafora et al., 2022). The expectation for virtual learning at the early childhood level is that an adult is required to assist their child for logging on and help with completing and submitting homework (Spadafora et al., 2022). One study reported that families could not provide the same quality of services as pre-pandemic due to higher needs of the family during the pandemic virtual learning period (Steed et al., 2022). Virtual learning is not always accepted as being developmentally appropriate for children due to the increased amount of screen time and their short attention span (Fettig et al., 2021). The American Academy of Pediatrics has also warned on the harmful effects of technology in early development (AAP Councils on Communications & Media, 2016).

Studies have emerged that discuss how teachers taught their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Teachers reported utilizing both asynchronous and synchronous learning activities for students (Parmigiani et al., 2021). Synchronous activities necessitated that students log in to a virtual platform at the same time as their classmates, whereas asynchronous activities could be completed at their own pace, on their own time. Lessons were taught through online platforms where teachers and students were able to sing songs, read stories, hold class meetings online, and teachers were able to meet individually with students online (Steed & Leech, 2021).

Some teachers reported making videos for their students depicting simple directional tasks that students could follow along with, though teachers reported this was tedious and exhausting work (Negrette et al., 2022). Ford et al. (2020) reported that teachers spent a great deal of their online time fielding questions and concerns from parents, leaving little room for actual instructional time. Teachers could record their instructional sessions from Zoom and post the videos for students who missed it in the live sessions (Szente, 2020). The addition of cameras and microphones became necessary for instruction; teachers described experiencing feelings of frustration with students talking over one another and muting microphones (Negrette et al., 2022). J. Chen and Adams (2022) found that the utilization of visuals and engaging students in targeted conversations were two instructional strategies that teachers used to enhance their social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual learning provided new challenges and unique obstacles for early childhood special education teachers. Teachers struggled to provide high-quality services to their students with special educational needs (Steed et al., 2022). Some teachers also reported feeling disconnected from their students and colleagues, discussing the struggle to communicate with them during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period (Leech et al., 2022). Lambert and Fitzpatrick (2022) stated that one issue was that teachers were unable to observe students' true capabilities through the virtual format, making it difficult to know what concepts were mastered. This is a challenge that could potentially hinder decisions that teachers make about teaching next concepts to their students.

Early childhood special education students also faced unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. With the sudden switch to virtual learning in March 2020, students were forced to use different skillsets required for virtual learning (Kamei & Harriott, 2021). Students' screen time also increased from one to three hours daily after the switch to virtual learning (Yesil et al., 2022). Seguin et al. (2021) found that parent stress levels increased when child screen time increased, yet when parent involvement increased, the students' screen time also decreased. Families reported receiving their virtual learning services online, though one study reported that 17.2% of students' services ceased completely when the switch to virtual learning was made (Yesil et al., 2022). Once schools made the switch to the virtual learning setting, it posed now-irrelevant accommodations that needed to be changed or removed from the IEP, such as preferential seating or physical prompting, which are impossible accommodations in the virtual learning setting (B. Chen et al., 2022). Other changes to the IEP included shifting the service provider to the parent from the teacher to allow them to track and monitor data on goals and objectives (Hurwitz et al., 2022).

Sociocultural Theory in the Virtual Learning Setting

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has evolved to include skills needed in the 21st century to increase higher-order thinking skills in students (Agopian, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period, early childhood special education teachers were challenged to teach social-emotional skills via virtual instruction to their students. Once the initial shock of virtual learning environment wore off, teachers reported feeling more relaxed with providing services virtually (Melloy & Murry, 2022). Though face-to-

face interactive social opportunities with peers did not exist during the virtual learning period, the sociocultural theory requires that the MKO only needs to be present to facilitate learning as a guide (Agopian, 2022). This also means that the MKO can be a sibling or a parent when in a virtual learning setting. As virtual learning was being studied prior to the COVID-19 virtual learning period, Erdogan (2016) explored this setting in the sociocultural foundation context. Erdogan (2016) noted that student learning avenues were becoming larger and larger, and it was undeniable that learning does occur between people and the world in the virtual context. Ünlüsoy et al. (2022) posited that the introduction of social media had altered dynamics of human interactions and created new possibilities for interactive more collective forms of learning. Ünlüsoy et al. (2022) also stated that learners have access to educational video clips, such as a video that has been uploaded to YouTube, that can provide learning opportunities outside of the culture where the learner resides. Vygotsky's (1978) belief that learning occurs with a skillful tutor can be applied to these types of educational videos. According to Vygotsky, however, the MKO would still be responsible for correcting or expanding on the child's experience in real time. The MKO is responsible for encouraging the advancement of higher-level skills, a process known as scaffolding (J. Chen & Badolato, 2023). Teachers often provide scaffolding strategies to their students to encourage a higher level of thinking in their learning process (Roslan et al., 2022). Some of the specific instructional strategies that teachers were able to scaffold for social-emotional growth were morning check-in times where students told how they were feeling, and they also read and discussed stories through virtual platforms such as Zoom (J. Chen & Badolato, 2023).

The literature has not provided any insight into what teachers' perspectives were about teaching social-emotional skills virtually to their students. One study's results depicted a list of the most common approaches to enhancing social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rosanbalm, 2021). Some of the approaches included whole group online classes where students can connect with peers and teachers, brain breaks where students can practice coping and wellness skills, and teachers would coach social-emotional skills during a class discussion time (Rosanbalm, 2021). Teachers in one study reported that they felt shared reading was a successful strategy in developing social-emotional skills but did not go into further detail (J. Chen & Badolato, 2023). The teachers stated that they read stories virtually based on various social-emotional concepts such as friendship and sharing (J. Chen & Badolato, 2023).

Teachers reported that they faced several challenges in the virtual learning setting that they had no control over. A study by J. Chen and Garcia (2023) reported that the home environment posed distractions that had negatively affected the child's ability to focus their attention. Another common theme among the literature is that teachers experienced challenges with students missing class due to not being able to connect to the Internet or not having the appropriate technology at their home (Spiteri et al., 2023). Researchers reported that attendance for students was low for various reasons but that students with disabilities were sometimes educationally neglected as parents prioritized the education of their typically developing children (Karnas et al., 2023). Though these stressors cannot be predicted in context of virtual learning, it is important to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives so this can be properly addressed for

stakeholders in the event of future events where virtual learning is the only mode of instruction for students.

Summary

An abundance of literature related to early childhood special education teachers' experiences surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic was reviewed. Much of the research indicated that teachers struggled to teach their students social-emotional skills virtually when face-to-face opportunities did not exist during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many teachers reported being concerned about their students' social-emotional skills as schools were closed and students were forced to remain home until further notice. While the literature revealed that early childhood special education teachers were expected to teach social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature did not reveal their perspectives of how those skills were taught. The results of the literature review depicted teachers as struggling with the initial move to virtual learning, yet they were able to complete the school year feeling that they improved their virtual learning practices over time. The purpose of this study was to explore the early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. A review of the literature indicated that there is a lack of research pertaining to early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 virtual learning period. This chapter contains an overview of the literature research strategy, the theoretical framework, and a review of the current literature.

Chapter 3 includes a clearer interpretation of the components within the methodology that will be implemented in the study. Chapter 3 also includes information about the participant selection, instrumentation, and recruitment procedures, as well as the data analysis, data collection plan, and the data analysis plan. The research design, rationale for the study, and an explanation for how I was able to ensure an ethical and trustworthy study are also included.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to students in the virtual learning setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early childhood special education teachers who taught virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic were recruited to provide their perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills virtually to their students. Participants were encouraged to disclose their perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to early childhood special needs students to identify any challenges, successes, and reflections on their experiences. Chapter 3 contains information on the research design, rationale, and the role of the researcher. In the methodology section, the logic behind choosing participants, instrumentation, recruiting procedures, and the data analysis plan are discussed. Chapter 3 also contains a discussion of the trustworthiness of the procedure and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that guided this study was the following: What are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to COVID-19 pandemic? This study included a basic qualitative design in which one-on-one interviews with voluntary participants were conducted via phone and the Zoom app. The basic qualitative design was suitable for this study because this form of inquiry allows the researcher to analyze information being communicated through language and behavior (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). In a qualitative study, the researcher gathers information directly from the source who can relay their

experiences regarding an event (Berkwits & Inui, 1998). The current study participants, who taught early childhood special education students virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, were able to offer their perspectives and experiences, including their challenges and successes.

Other research designs were considered prior to choosing the basic qualitative design. The first design considered was ethnography, which is a qualitative method of exploring how societies or individuals live (University of Virginia, 2022). Ethnography was not considered appropriate for my study because evidence about a specific culture was not being sought. The phenomenological design was also considered; however, not enough information had been found to say a phenomenon had taken place. The quantitative method was not considered because the perspectives of these teachers could not have been expressed in the quantitative form. The qualitative method provided the means to answer the research question.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher for this study, my roles were to interview participants, record interviews, transcribe responses, and analyze the data. I was an early childhood special education teacher from 2005 to 2019, ending my tenure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had not worked in the classroom since 2019, but my experiences in the classroom included teaching early childhood special education students and exposing them to social-emotional experiences and activities. I did not have any experience teaching students virtually. I had no prior experience working with any of the participants in this study, and I did not include anyone that I know in this study. My previous teaching

experiences created a desire for me to understand how social-emotional skills were addressed by teachers through the virtual setting because play and face-to-face activities were not accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The potential for ethical issues and research bias existed, though I mitigated those issues as they arose. Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines were followed to ensure all ethical measures are followed. The IRB approval number for this study was 10-04-23-0116589. My previous experiences in the classroom could have presented inadvertent biases in the study, but I was cognizant of excluding any information in the study that could have been construed as being biased. To help with this, reflexive journaling was employed, and my thoughts were written down to prevent any biased opinions.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants were purposefully selected for this study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), purposeful sampling consists of participants who are chosen based on their experience or knowledge. Participants were recruited via an invitation posted to the Walden University Participant Pool as well as social media groups where early childhood special education teachers are members. There were ten early childhood special education teachers who were chosen as participants; all teachers were required to have taught social-emotional skills to students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The small sample size was essential to understand the perspectives of participants since the intimate one on one setting allowed for substantial descriptive information to be shared. Participants were trusted to provide accurate and truthful

experiences as well as provide their background information for teaching in the early childhood special education classroom during the virtual learning period. Prior to participation in the study, participants verbally agreed that they meet the criterion for the study as listed in the invitation. The first criterion is that participants must be certified in early childhood special education with experience with students in pre-k through third grade before and during the 2020-2021 school year. The second criterion is that the teachers must have taught social-emotional skills to their students in the virtual learning format in the 2020-2021 school year. The third criterion is that the teacher must have taught in a public-school setting in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants who met the criteria were emailed an Informed Consent Form that contained information about my background, what they could expect in the interview, sample interview questions, and information about the protection of participant privacy.

Instrumentation

Research instruments are necessary tools to collect data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this basic qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews to collect the data. I created the Interview Protocol Guide (Appendix) with open-ended interview questions and clarifying prompts to guide the interviews about participants' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to students in virtual settings. The theoretical framework was applied and related literature to develop interview questions. To ensure content validity, interview questions were informally reviewed by two current teachers in the field of early childhood special education. Both teachers hold degrees in early childhood and special education and have combined experience of over 20 years in teaching. A

fellow doctoral student within the Walden University PhD program also informally assisted with reviewing the interview questions.

Each participant was asked the same interview questions following the same format to ensure consistency among interviews. Participants' responses to the interview questions are the primary source of data. The interviews were audio recorded via the Zoom app to ensure accuracy of data collected from participants' responses. For the participants who elected to be contacted by telephone, their interviews were audio recorded onto my laptop. Answers to questions were analyzed to uncover recurring codes and emerging themes. The Interview Protocol Guide (Appendix) includes demographics questions for the participant, background questions, and interview questions. All teachers who elected to participate in the study received a thank you email that included a schedule for the interview. Interview data were thematically analyzed to answer the research question. Data were analyzed until data saturation was reached and the research question was answered.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The study consisted of 10 early childhood special education teachers who taught their students social-emotional skills virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool and social media groups where early childhood special education teachers are members. Snowball sampling was applied to obtain additional participants. Participants were from various regions of the United States, and they provided a range of their experiences teaching social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited after the invitation was posted in the Walden University Participant Pool and social media groups where early childhood special education teachers are members. In the invitation, volunteers were asked to contact me via email to express their interest in taking part in this study. Participants chosen for the study were sent an initial email confirming their intent to volunteer. An Informed Consent form was attached to the email for the participant to review. Participants were informed they could keep the Informed Consent form, but they were asked to email me back with the words "I consent" if they wanted to continue with the study. The data was collected via one-on-one semistructured interviews that were audio recorded via the Zoom app or phone. Interviews took place via phone and the Zoom app and were recorded onto my laptop for password protected security.

Participation

Through the Walden University Participant Pool and my social media invitation posts, I recruited 10 early childhood special education teachers to offer their perspectives in this study. Specifically, these teachers needed to have virtually taught social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It did not matter how many years of teaching experience the participants had.

This study did not interfere with teachers' work schedules, and the interviews were not held during work hours. Interviews were in the evening hours and weekends at the participants' request. Chosen participants were emailed a schedule to arrange their

interviews. For their convenience, participants were given an option to choose to schedule their interview on a weekday after school hours or on a Saturday afternoon.

Data Collection

Participants gave their consent to the interview via email. To accomplish the objectives of this study, the interviews were conducted with 10 early childhood special education teachers who taught social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Interview questions were asked one at a time, and up to 60 minutes was allotted for each interview.

Before the interview, a courtesy email was sent to the participants reminding them of their upcoming interview. To prepare for the interview, the Interview Protocol (Appendix) was reviewed for familiarity. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded that the interview would be audio recorded, and they could ask for a break at any time. The recording of the interview ended once all questions were asked, and the participant stated they were finished. As the interviews concluded, participants were reminded that their responses would remain confidential, and they were asked if they had any final questions. Member checking was used by sending the participants a two-page summary of the findings to review and provide feedback. Participants were reminded to expect the summary once transcripts were completed and analyzed. Participants were thanked at the conclusion of the call, and they were released from the interview once there were no additional questions.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is an organization and preparation of the data, consisting of reading, reflecting on, and interpreting the overall meaning of the data, conducting analysis based on method, producing a description of the people and identification of emerging themes, and representing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the interviews were finalized, the audio recordings were uploaded to Microsoft Word, an online program that will transcribe the audio into text. When the transcripts were transcribed from Microsoft Word, the audio-to-text document was reviewed to confirm accuracy. A word-by-word account of the participants' interview helped with data analysis.

Saldaña's (2015) coding process was used to examine the transcripts to identify common themes, topics, and patterns. The open coding process was used by highlighting key terms and phrases that stand out within the transcripts (see Saldaña, 2015). Highlighting terms and phrases in distinguishable colors helped me organize the data into manageable components (see Saldaña, 2015). Axial coding was applied to identify the codes from open coding that should be grouped together and combined into categories (see Saldaña, 2015). As terms were categorized and further analyzed, themes emerged that answered the research question.

Analysis of the data helped me to identify emerging themes related to the early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period to answer the research question. The data was examined for emerging themes. The data was reviewed and analyzed until I reached saturation. Saturation occurs when no new themes or

patterns arise in the data (see Burkholder et al., 2016). The data was entered into a Microsoft Excel chart to create an organized list to categorically separate the key terms. Discrepant data occurs during analysis when the researcher believes the information to be contradictory to the emerging patterns and themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). There were no discrepancies found in the data.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that a research study's value is supported by its trustworthiness. Amankwaa (2016) defined credibility in research as the confidence in the truth of the findings. In this study, the member checking strategy was used to ensure credibility. The interviews were audio recorded to precisely capture the participants' experiences. Once transcripts and my notes were reviewed, a two-page summary of the study findings was produced. Participants were asked to report any comments or additional information to me by phone or email.

Transferability refers to the ability to demonstrate that the study's findings are applicable in other contexts (Amankwaa, 2016). To ensure transferability, a thick description was provided, which is an extensive detailed description of the data, and the context for which it was taken. Through thick description, readers can judge the appropriateness of transferring my findings to their own situation or setting.

Dependability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the study's findings are consistent and could be replicated in future studies (Amankwaa, 2016). Dependability was ensured by following the same interview process with each participant consistently (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, member checking was used by

sending a two-page summary to the participants to be reviewed and returned with any comments. Participants were asked to review the interview summary. Member checking is a strategy utilized by researchers to ensure trustworthiness in the study and to rule out any misinterpretation of the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Dependability was ensured through use of an audit trail. An audit trail is a detailed account of the record keeping for the study through raw data, data notes, a reflexive journal, materials, and instrument development information (Carcary, 2020).

The confirmability of a qualitative study is a determination of whether the data were appropriately interpreted in the study and confirmed by other researchers (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To achieve confirmability, reflexive journaling was used to maintain a self-critical analysis of my biases, my responses to the research process, and any modifications that were made to the study based on ongoing analysis (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Microsoft Word was used to transcribe interviews. Transcripts were then manually coded and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' intent. Software was not used to code any of the data.

Ethical Procedures

Approval for this study was requested, and the ethical requirements according to Walden University (IRB) were followed to ensure the study includes ethical procedures. An initial email was sent to each chosen volunteer who emailed to express interest in participating in the study. The email included a description of the data collection procedures, confidentiality protection, and the amount of time that was going to be required for the participant. Participants were asked to send a reply email with "I

consent" as their response if they intended on participating in the interview. If there was no response from the volunteer within 48 hours, a follow-up email was sent to them. If the email went unanswered after an additional 48 hours, it was assumed that the person no longer wished to participate, and their information was deleted and marked as being uninterested in participation.

Ethical concerns related to the data collection were recognized. Participants were informed that they reserved the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and for any reason. Participants were told that interviews could be concluded by them, or they could refuse to answer a question. Participants were offered breaks and the opportunity to reschedule the interview if it was needed. Any personal information shared with me will remain confidential. The participants' personal identifiers were removed and replaced to protect the identity of the participant. Participants are identified by letter P and a number to signify the order in which the interview was held. These chosen identifiers were used in describing the findings of the study. The only person with access to the data via an electronic passcode will be me. The data will remain in my care for at least five years, as required by Walden University, to avoid any future risk of confidentiality breaches. Recorded material will be deleted in five years following final approval by the research committee.

Summary

In this chapter, the rationale for choosing a basic qualitative research design was explained. My role as the researcher was described, as well as the selection criteria for finding and choosing participants. This chapter also included the type of data that was

used, a justification for data collection and data analysis, and the procedures that were used. In Chapter 4, data collection, data analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness, and recommendations are discussed.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to students during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question being asked was the following: What are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic? Participants were recruited through the Walden University Participant Pool and social media groups where early childhood special education teachers are members, as well as snowball sampling. Participants emailed me to express their interest in participating in the study, and interviews were scheduled at their convenience.

In Chapter 4, the study results are presented. This chapter also includes a discussion of the study's setting, participant demographics, data collection and analysis methods, and evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes.

Setting

For this study, the participants were 10 early childhood special education teachers located in the United States who shared their perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Participants taught their early childhood special education students in grades Pre-K through third grade. Participants were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool and social media sites where early childhood special education teachers are members. Snowball sampling was also used to recruit more participants. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 5 to 40 years.

One-on-one semistructured interviews were conducted via the Zoom app and by phone. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Microsoft Word, and edited by me prior to the coding and analysis process. There were no unexpected circumstances that affected the data collection process or the analysis of the data.

Demographics

Data were collected from 10 early childhood special education teachers who taught their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. All participants were from Georgia, Virginia, and California. All participants were certified in early childhood special education. Two of the participants were doctoral students. None of the participants taught virtually prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown; however, two participants noted they completed their graduate studies online. The participants' number of years taught was collected to understand their experience prior to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Since the pandemic school closures, half of the teachers remained in the same position, whereas two teachers retired, one teacher moved out of state, and two teachers changed teaching positions (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographics

Participant	Teaching experience (years)	Prior experience teaching virtually?	Remained in position?	Level of education
P1	14	No	No	Bachelor's degree
P2	17	No	Yes	Bachelor's degree
P3	05	No	Yes	Master's degree
P4	20	No	Yes	Master's degree
P5	05	No	Yes	Bachelor's degree
P6	38	No	No	Specialist degree
P7	40	No	No	Master's degree
P8	12	No	Yes	Doctoral student
P9	13	No	No	Doctoral student
P10	23	No	No	Master's degree

Data Collection

Data collection began once approval was received from the IRB. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for this study. Recruitment of 10 participants was achieved from posting to the Walden University Participant Pool and social media groups where early childhood special education teachers are members. Participants interested in the study reached out to me via their school email. A consent form was emailed to the participant to explain the background, procedures, risks, benefits, privacy, and the voluntary nature of this study. Potential participants were instructed to email me with the words "I consent" if they chose to move forward with participating in this study. Participants suggested the day and time convenient for them to participate in the study. Data collection occurred over a period of approximately 24 weeks with each interview lasting an average of 55 minutes.

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were informed what to expect during the interview. Each participant was assured that their identity would remain anonymous, and each participant was asked if they had any questions or concerns before starting the interview. Each interview varied in length based on the amount of information shared by the participants. Interviews were conducted in a single Zoom session, or via phone call, in a semistructured interview format. The Interview Protocol (see Appendix) was used to conduct each interview similarly. The Interview Protocol was used to write any additional notes throughout the interview.

Each participant was asked the same questions to guarantee that the same general information was collected. At the close of each interview, the participant was thanked and asked if they had any questions. Participants were informed that they would receive a summary report of the study's findings. A reflective journal was used to keep my personal thoughts in. Interviews were audio recorded within the Zoom app, and the transcript audio was saved to my laptop. Microsoft Word was used to upload and transcribe the interview audio. The audio-to-text transcript was reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy. No visuals were obtained during the interviews.

The recordings of the Zoom and phone audio with the transcripts will be stored on my password-protected computer in my home office for at least 5 years. After 5 years, the recordings and transcripts will be deleted and destroyed. The steps described in Chapter 3 were followed to conduct the research, and there were no unexpected occurrences during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide were used to analyze the data in this study. In preparation for analysis, each interview transcript was reviewed several times against the audio recording to guarantee accuracy. Each interview transcript was organized and saved as a final document to begin analysis. The data were analyzed based on the study's literature and conceptual framework. Open coding was applied to identify and highlight any repeating words, phrases, and concepts to answer the research question. There were no unexpected conditions encountered during the data analysis process.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Myself With the Data

Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted that Phase 1 of data analysis involves familiarizing oneself with the data. To do this, each audio recording was reviewed with the transcript text to confirm accuracy of the data. Audio recordings from interviews were compared with the transcribed text of the interview several times for accuracy. The interview transcripts were printed and organized based on the order of the interview sessions and labeled with the participants' identifier. There are no participants' names that are associated with the transcribed documents because each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code to ensure privacy. Each participant was labeled by using the letter "P" and a numeral from 1 to 10 based on the order their interview was conducted. Transcripts were reviewed while also being cognizant of the repetition in the data. My thoughts and noted outstanding factors were written down, such as when a participant was being sarcastic, on each transcript as I read them.

Phase 2: Generating the Codes

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 2 involves breaking the data down into smaller, more meaningful codes to identify specific content within the data. Inductive reasoning strategies were used for the data analysis of this study. Open and axial coding was used in the data analysis process. In open coding, my notes were written down as each transcript was reviewed. The transcripts were read line by line, seeking out key words, phrases, and concepts that were relevant to the conceptual framework to answer the research question and the literature review of the study topic. On the transcript, the codes were labeled within the Microsoft Word document. All identified statements and phrases assigned an open code were then manually copied to a new column adjacent to the interview text in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each participants' identifiers were listed along the top of the spreadsheet and then labeled which participant made the corresponding statement. Open codes are listed in Table 2, along with the participant and the related excerpt.

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Excessive screen time	P1	"It just got to where you didn't want to show them anymore videos 'cause they were doing that on their own time."
	P4	"I think anything more than 30 minutes is too much. Even for a kindergartener, it's too much."
Students distracted	P3	"I would have to start over or redirect, so it sometimes took away from the lessons."
	P5	"The kids would get distracted [and] bringing them back to what we were doing was a lot harder and a lot more time consuming."
No interactions	P6	"I wasn't able to demonstrate the skills I wanted them to learn. We had none of that normal, interactive thing."
	P10	"There was no fun banter back and forth with fingerplays and dancing the music together. While we could still do that, the screen lost any of that kind of interaction."
Needed parent nearby	P2	"I had to rely on their parents to keep them in the learning space."
	P7	"When I taught with a preschooler, parents had to be nearby."
Drastic change	P9	"It drastically changed for me because my students did not have use of their hands."
	P10	"I think it was thrown at us in a weekend and then we were told 'Hey, you've got Spring Break and then we're doing this.'"
Slow growth progress	P5	"Without someone to play with, we weren't necessarily growing in those areas."
	P9	"We weren't able, probably, to see a lot of growth because it was very difficult to do that."
Unreliable technology	P2	"We'd have everybody online except for one, and a parent would be struggling to get in."
	P1	"Many of the parents and many of the students don't have Internet. When they do, it doesn't work very well."
Virtual not authentic	P1	"You can't get the same thing out of being in person. You can't in virtual."
	P6	"You can't run those scenarios that happen in real life, over a screen."
Teaching SES online difficult	P4	"The social-emotional thing, it's a hard thing to teach anyway. Even in person, it's such a hard thing to teach and it's not something that happens overnight."
	P10	"The stress that was online learning at the time with three- and four-year-olds. Just the limitations of gaining attention and sustaining attention to a screen."
Parent tracks data	P7	"I had to rely on parent report. I only saw the children at the most 3 hours a week, which would be three different sessions."
	P9	"We had two parents, and I had a meeting with them and discussed the goals and how they would track the data on goals."

Next, axial coding was used to examine initial codes and develop categories. Codes that had the same or similar meaning were combined or condensed. This process continued until each of the codes were in similar groups. Categories were named based on the type of coding each category contained. Axial coding resulted in a list of eight categories. A Microsoft Word document was used to list codes generated from the open coding phase. Table 3 depicts a sample of open codes, categories, and the participants' identifiers, and quotes from data collected from each interview.

Table 3

Examples of Open Codes and Categories

Category	Code	Participant	Excerpt
Parent involvement	Emails	P7	"Sometimes I'd e-mail that, usually a PowerPoint of a book, and gave them tools for practicing purposes."
	Communication important	P10	"We would talk about any other ways to get together with the neighborhood kids."
Virtual SES resources helpful	Websites & apps	P1	"They have a website now, so, Teach Town was one that we could use that really helps."
	Online learning programs	P6	"The kids did a lot on SeeSaw and they loved it because they could record their own videos."
Successful SES strategies	Sent materials home	P9	"I took materials out to people's houses and people come by and got stuff."
	Shortened lessons	P6	"All in all, I'd say it lasted about 20 minutes maybe."
	Virtual not authentic	P7	"They really have to be a part of a situation. So that's where that I think that would be the most detrimental."
Unreliable technology	Unreliable technology	P3	"I had to be really sensitive to that fact and to understand to just to be more understanding with late assignments or not logging on because maybe the kids don't have access to the Internet."
Challenging parent involvement	Working parents	P10	"Typically, both parents worked so the child would be doing the lesson at a daycare."
	Parent doing student work	P5	"I would know [students] are unable developmentally to complete that independently."
Requires parent involvement	Parent nearby needed	P4	"They're gonna run away from the computer. They're not going to be there. So, the parents had to be there."
	Parent reports progress	P7	"I had to rely on parent report. I only saw the children at the most 3 hours a week, which would be three different sessions."
Virtual teaching strategies needed	Teacher training needed	P8	"I think I would probably just have to be trained on whatever newer programs there are."
	Virtual curriculum	P10	"Better curriculum, being more prepared."

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that Phase 3 begins when the researcher transitions from codes to themes. During this phase, categories were grouped together and refined based on similar meanings and characteristics on a Microsoft Word document. Axial codes were organized, and emerging themes were discovered. It was ensured that each category belonged in the group and the name assigned accurately reflected the categories. From this analysis, there were three themes that emerged: (a) Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) Teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, (c) Teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching SES virtually. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the themes with categorical data, refine the themes, and verify relationships between the themes and the research question.

Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) asserted that the set of themes developed during Phase 3 should be refined by the researcher in Phase 4. To do this, the codes and categories were reviewed to ensure they were aligned with the themes. This was completed on a Microsoft Word table to create an audit trail to ensure a clear explanation from codes, to categories, and themes. Reviewing transcripts, codes, and categories provided clarity that there was enough data to support each decision and each of the three themes.

Phase 5: Defining and Labeling Themes

During Phase 5, each of the final three themes were clearly defined and labeled as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The relevance of each theme was evaluated in relation to the research question. The research question to be answered was: what are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic? There were no discrepant cases that would contradict the study findings. Categories and themes can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Categories and Themes

Category	Theme
Parent communication during virtual Parent SES responsibilities Virtual SES resources helpful Successful SES strategies	Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning
Unreliable technology SES difficult to monitor virtually SES challenging with parents Not authentic hands-on interactions	Teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning virtually
Reliance on parents Progress monitoring difficult, unreliable Virtual teacher needs	Teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills

Phase 6: Producing the Report

During the sixth and final phase, a summary analysis of the themes and results of this study was completed. Braun and Clark (2012) suggested that analyzing data in this phase is about creating a narrative of the study results. After this phase of data analysis, it

was determined that there were three emergent themes that answered the research question. The three themes were then applied to the interview findings discussion.

Discrepant Cases

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that discrepant cases contradict the study findings. Discrepant cases occur in qualitative data when the participant says something that deviates from the themes within the data. During the data analysis process, there was no evidence found that would contradict the study's findings, so further analysis was not necessary.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

A researcher must be aware of certain criteria to remain trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that a research study's value is supported by its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was attained by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Early childhood special education experts' opinions were sought to assess each interview question for content validity. Each of the interviews was replicated by asking each participant the same questions.

Credibility

Amankwaa (2016) defined credibility as the confidence in the study's findings. To achieve credibility, a positive rapport with each participant was established, which helped me in gaining information about their perspectives. Detailed notes were kept throughout the research process. Member checking was used to ensure credibility. Interviews were audio recorded to capture the spoken words of each participant. A two-page summary of the study's findings was produced by me and provided to each of the

participants. The participants were asked to read the summary and report any discrepancies. No participants had any further concerns.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to demonstrate that the study's findings can be applicable in other contexts (Amankwaa, 2016). To ensure transferability, purposeful sampling was used. A thick description was provided, which is an extensive deep description of the data. Only the experiences of early childhood special education teachers who taught their students social-emotional skills virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic were included in the study. Teacher participants' credentials varied in advanced degrees and teaching experience. A thick description of teacher participant perspectives along with the setting provided a detailed interpretation of the contextual factors. Through thick description, readers can judge the appropriateness of transferring my findings to their own situation or setting.

Dependability

Dependability can be established if the study is consistent and can be repeated (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Dependability was ensured through following the same interview process with each of the participants (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The interview instrument used was established by me, and I directed each of the one-on-one interviews. The interview protocol was used consistently with each participant. The interview questions were open-ended, and exclusive to the topic to reduce off-topic conversations (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016a). Precise, purposeful follow-up questions were also planned asked of each participant during their interviews (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016a). I also used

member checking by sending each participant a two-page summary of the findings to be returned with any comments if participants had any questions or comments about their interview. Participants had no additional comments. Dependability was guaranteed through using an audit trail, a step that also relates to confirmability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to whether the findings of a study could be replicated by another researcher; this includes excluding personal biases and using empirical evidence in the study (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). An audit trail was used to establish clear procedures for data analysis and data collection. The audit trail allowed me to reflect on the research process and assess the transparency within my study. Reflexive journaling was used to maintain a self-critical analysis of my biases, my responses to the research process, and any modifications made to the study based on ongoing analysis (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Each interview was audio recorded, and Microsoft Word was used for transcribing interviews from audio to text. Each audio recording was reviewed and compared to the transcribed text several times for accuracy. Transcripts were manually coded and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' intent. Software was not used to code any of the data.

Results

Early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period were examined. In this section, the results of the data are shared from the 10 semistructured interviews with early childhood special education teachers in which I asked nine open-

ended questions about their experiences. Interview questions were designed to answer the research question, which focused on early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Three themes emerged from the data collected to answer the research question: (a) Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) Teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, (c) Teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching SES virtually.

Theme 1: Teachers Noted Specific Resources and Parental Involvement as Key to Success in Virtual Learning

The first theme was focused on the success that teachers experienced with parent involvement and virtual resources and activities. The information was used to answer the research question, and the results indicate that teachers did experience some successes during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. When early childhood special education teachers were asked to share their perspectives on teaching social-emotional skills to students during the virtual learning period, participants shared the importance of parent involvement and activities that they found to be beneficial in the virtual learning setting. Though most teachers stated that teaching social-emotional skills virtually to students was challenging, they found ways to support their students successfully.

Successful Virtual Social-Emotional Skills Requires Parent Involvement

Teachers emphasized that parent involvement successfully influenced their students' social-emotional learning skills during the COVID-19 virtual learning period.

Teachers also indicated that it was beneficial to see and communicate with families more frequently as they met with students virtually. P2 shared that one positive aspect of virtual learning was that they were able to communicate on a more intimate level, getting more familiar with the families of their students. P2 remarked that "being online, we got to know the families from kind of a different side." P7 noted that, during sessions, parents often asked what they could do to help. P7 frequently used several lines of communication during virtual learning, stating that "I would get the questions, 'Well, what can we do?' and I would give them different strategies. If they would send me an e-mail, I'd e-mail them back, of course. Or sometimes they would call." P8 recalled frequently reaching out to students and parents through email, "I was still able to communicate with everyone via e-mail, even if they couldn't join us in our face to face" noting the importance of contacting students and parents when they could not see them in virtual sessions.

Teachers believed that their students' success in the virtual learning setting depended on increased communication with the parents. P7 shared that increased communication allowed her to provide strategies to the parents during synchronous one-on-one sessions, stating "I gave his mom some strategies, because they would practice. At other times, and as he got more confident in his abilities, I didn't see the tears. So, to me, that was a plus." Teachers felt that frequent parent communication was crucial to their students' success through the virtual learning period. P8 reported that talking with parents via synchronous virtual sessions was helpful, stating that she had "a lot of communicating back and forth with parents" to support students' learning during the

virtual learning period. P10 also mentioned that communicating via virtual sessions with students was a successful strategy, stating "I would ask at home, how they were doing, if they were still able to go to gymnastic class or, you know, swim." Since the closure of most public spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, P10 was interested in hearing from parents about activities that students were able to participate in to determine their level of peer engagement through the virtual learning period.

There were also other ways that teachers communicated with the parents of students during the virtual learning period. P7 added that they communicated with parents during the virtual learning period by "sending home a little newsletter once a week, 'hey, here are some ideas you can do at home that would be kind of fun for your child' and none of it was screen time." P7 stated that she communicated to parents that the additional activities were to counterbalance the time lost in the classroom during the virtual learning period. P3 believed that sending a survey to parents was an important way for parents to communicate their wants and needs for their children, stating that "parents are wanting for their kids socially because, sometimes, if you're not aligned with what the parents want, it's hard to have the buy-in with the students."

For students in early childhood special education, parents and teachers participated in virtual IEP meetings; student information could be shared virtually with parents after the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. P1 recalled communicating with parents in virtual IEP meetings after the virtual transition. She discussed the importance of communicating with parents to make changes on IEP goals based on the transition from face-to-face to the virtual setting:

> We had to look at all of them and decide if we could serve the goal with fidelity over our virtual meetings, and if we couldn't, then we went in with the parents and made amendments to be able to only serve what we could.

Noting the importance of parent involvement during the virtual learning period, P2 reported that she "spent a lot of time making lots of different forms for parents to fill out." She stated that making electronic forms was time consuming; however, she believed this was a successful way to communicate with parents and gather information from them during the virtual learning period. Overall, teachers believed that parent involvement was a large component of ensuring success in the virtual learning process for their students. Teachers used several approaches to involve parents during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period.

Since teachers could not be with students after the transition from the face-to-face to virtual setting, parents were tasked with being the teacher. Six of the 10 teachers interviewed reported that they taught, or coached, the parents' strategies to work with their children at home. The teachers also suggested that it was important to teach parents how to track data on goals while students were home during the virtual learning period. There were student IEP goals that were impossible for the teacher to track during the virtual learning period due to the change in setting. P9 shared that she "just had a meeting with them and discussed the goals and how they would track the data on goals." P7 recalled that she taught parents how to work with their children, stating that she "gave them tools for practicing purposes during the pandemic" as parent involvement increased through the virtual learning period. P2 mentioned that there were social-emotional skills

unable to be observed virtually, and she demonstrated to parents how to track the data on goals that could only be served at home. P2 remarked how she asked parents to track data on items like hanging up their jackets while they were at home during the virtual learning period:

> If it was something that I couldn't necessarily see on camera like if a child had a goal to hang it up after playtime, mealtime, or like independent work time, sometimes we would initial that we couldn't do that part on campus. That's when we would write, "counting from *blank*, how many times did you have to ask them?"

Teachers believed that successful parent involvement during the virtual learning period also included having the parents assist in teaching social-emotional lessons to students. P8 described a lesson where it was beneficial for parents to assist teachers in teaching about staying healthy through the COVID-19 pandemic: "my parents and I would reenact certain situations and did a lot of, like, even through Christmas time, we put our elf in quarantine in our classroom." P6 stated that parent involvement was successful for them when she "had to teach the strategies to the parents virtually and then ask them to do certain things during the session to see how the child would react to them." P10 added that parent help for teaching virtual lessons was beneficial, stating, "When I had the help of a parent, I could send things from school 'here's the song we're going to do,' 'the lesson we're looking we're working on', and there would be some prep work done beforehand." P7 mentioned that successful parent involvement during the virtual learning period included parents who learned how to work with their children, remarking that

"parents that were watching would see what some of the different strategies that we would do." Teachers in this study indicated that parent involvement was essential for student success in the virtual learning environment. Teachers believed that those students who attended virtual learning sessions and completed lessons with the help of an involved parent were more successful than those whose parents were not involved.

Successful Virtual Social-Emotional Skills Requires Virtual Resources and Activities

Over time, teachers were able to identify virtual resources and activities that effectively supported their students' social-emotional development in the online learning environment. Teachers shared that there were several websites and online learning programs that were advantageous while also positively supporting their students' social-emotional skills. Teachers also reported using several activities and strategies in the virtual setting that they found to be beneficial to use with their students.

All 10 teachers in this study discussed websites and programs that they used for social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. P1 shared that she recommended that their students go to the website SesameStreet.org to watch suggested videos with social-emotional skill content. Similarly, P4 remarked that she liked utilizing Sesame Street videos and websites with social-emotional skill content, remarking how she used them to teach about mask safety, "I did Sesame Street, I had Abby Cadabby, and she had Julia and Julia has autism, and Julia talked about not wanting to wear a mask." P7 revealed that the cartoon character Daniel Tiger on Pbskids.org was an effective and successful resource for teaching social-emotional skills, stating that "Daniel Tiger was a very good program on PBS. Pbs.org, they have a lot of really nice situational stories." P8

used an app called SeeSaw with their students during the virtual learning period, exclaiming that, “it was absolutely amazing. You get on there and make videos how you needed to, and we would record a lot of our lessons. We would record after that because it works so well for our kiddos.” Teachers in this study discussed social-emotional learning apps they used during the virtual learning period but could also continue to use once they returned to face-to-face learning. P4 exclaimed that the program Lesson Pix was beneficial, and her school district continued to pay for the program to use after returning face-to-face, stating, “Lesson Pix was huge for us, and it still is really big. We use it all the time, but the introduction of that was incredible.”

Four teachers mentioned that they used a program called Teach Town, a social skills website and virtual learning program. P6 described using Teach Town with her students:

> It was a program that the kids loved, and they could identify with, and then they could use it one-on-one when they needed to. It wasn’t something the teacher had to implement for the class, and the parent could do it real quickly at home.

P2 also shared that she used Teach Town with her students to help increase social-emotional skill development during the virtual learning period:

> Teach Town has some videos and then some very simple activities that go along with it, and we can even send the characters home to the parents, and they could kind of use the puppets to interact kind of how we did on camera.

P10 mentioned that she used Teach Town with her students, and they would virtually role-play scenarios while in synchronous learning sessions. Each of the websites and

programs that teachers utilized during the virtual learning period were resources that teachers felt were appropriate and successful for their students. P1 also remarked that Teach Town was a program that she felt was successful in teaching students social-emotional skills virtually.

Four teachers in this study mentioned using social stories as a virtual resource to teach their students' social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. P2 stated that using social stories as a social-emotional skill activity was successful, stating that "we really relied on the social stories practicing." P7 also discussed addressing her students' social-emotional skills through social stories, stating that "I would do social stories. I was a master at creating social stories, getting pictures, putting them together and doing little booklets that I would leave with the teacher in the classroom or send home." P8 recalled preparing students for the return to face-to-face from virtual learning, remarking that she created social stories relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, "we had a lot of social stories about wearing a mask, a lot of visuals that I had to make." Teachers believed that social stories were successful in teaching students social-emotional skills virtually.

Participants shared that there were successful activities they used to support social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. Six teachers articulated that they believed sending student work materials home to parents and students was successful in supporting social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. P10 stated they "would email the little coloring sheet beforehand and do the craft with them via online." P8 shared that "from March through October, we dropped off probably four

different times at their houses." P4 remembered that they "would send stuff home, or we would tell the parents what we needed for that day. We were doing an art project, 'this is what you need' for that day." P2 mentioned that she sent materials home from the Teach Town program for parents to work with their children on their own time during the virtual learning period, stating they could "send the characters home to the parents, and they could kind of use the puppets to interact kind of how we did on camera."

Participants shared that student greetings were a successful social-emotional virtual learning activity they participated in through live synchronous sessions. Virtual programs and apps like Zoom or Microsoft Teams were used by students to see their friends in real time and participate in a social-emotional skills activity to say hello to them. P9 shared how her students participated in greeting peers virtually:

> All these students would obviously be on Zoom, and we would start by greetings and where some students required like a sign with a picture symbol on there, they might say hello or how are you? … then might take turns going around having everyone say, "good morning."

P9 expressed that student greetings are an important skill to learn in and out of the virtual setting. P5 explained that each of her students had an IEP greeting goal because this task could be easily tracked for data, if the students were signed in to the synchronous virtual session. P5 stated that "everyone being able to greet others was one. Specifically, peers just being comfortable around other students was a really big area of need." Teachers felt that greeting others is a social-emotional skill activity that could be seen and documented in live virtual sessions, making it an activity that was successfully implemented.

Seven teachers in this study mentioned that shortened synchronous social-emotional lessons were successful for student learning during the virtual learning period. P4 explained that shortened social-emotional virtual lessons were more successful for their students even though activities were planned out for a longer time, stating "I've got probably a 20-minute morning meeting that is planned out, but I do anywhere from eight minutes on a good day. On a really good day we're getting about 10 minutes." P10 also believed that shortened lessons were successful during the virtual learning sessions stating that her lessons were "no longer than 10 minutes." P7 mentioned that their virtual learning sessions were "usually from half-hour to 45-minute sessions," whereas a typical face-to-face social-emotional skills' learning session lasted for one hour. P8 explained that her social-emotional lessons were held from 10:00 – 10:30 am on school days. She discussed that holding social-emotional lessons consistently, at the same time daily, was important.

Teachers reported that having students watch educational videos with social-emotional skill content was a successful activity they assigned during the virtual learning period. P1 disclosed that they previewed and electronically sent many of the educational videos and video books that they found on YouTube for parents and students. Further, P1 stated they embedded videos within PowerPoint lessons. P4 also discussed using educational videos as a strategy for teaching social-emotional skills, stating,

> I would find the video on YouTube and then I would share the link, or I would share the video on Zoom, you can share video, right? And so, I would go on there and share the video and the whole class would see it at the same time.

Four teachers in this study felt that recording videos of themselves and other educational pre-recorded videos to send to students was a successful student activity during the virtual learning period. P4 explained that she put together a "following directions" task in a recorded video for the students to complete with their parents on their own time, remarking "I could record myself just doing something and then share myself doing it, or one of the IA's would have her son play music, or whatever, and she would share it and then we would share it." Teachers who shared educational videos with their students felt this type of activity was successful since students could watch the videos on their own time. Remarking on the effectiveness of watching pre-recorded videos during the virtual learning period, P8 stated that watching social-emotionally related recorded videos allowed students to "actually see how it's done instead of not focusing so much on implementing it themselves at the time." P7 shared that her family was involved in making social-emotional skills content videos to send to her students stating that "my daughter was taping me in the background."

The first theme to emerge and answer the research question was that teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning. Teachers in this study discussed ways they felt successful in teaching social-emotional skills to their students utilizing parent involvement and virtual resources and activities.

Theme 2: Teachers Noted Technology Issues, Monitoring, and Authentic Interactions as Challenges During Virtual Learning

The second theme to emerge in this study to answer the research question was based on challenges teachers experienced with unreliable technology, difficulty monitoring progress, a lack of parent involvement, and a lack of authentic and hands-on interactions. When teachers were asked to share their perspectives on teaching their students social-emotional skills virtually, all teachers shared challenging experiences they encountered. Teachers discussed experiencing challenges when teaching social-emotional skills, and some of these challenges were impossible to overcome. During the virtual learning period, the challenges teachers experienced caused them to believe that they could not sufficiently perform at their job. Four teachers in this study commented that they hoped that they would never have to return to the virtual setting due to the difficulty of the challenges they encountered.

Teachers' Social-Emotional Skills Challenge on Unreliable Technology

After the transition to virtual learning, teachers were left feeling frustrated with the challenge of not having reliable technology to teach their students. Teachers in this study shared that one major frustrating aspect of teaching social-emotional skills to their students was dealing with technical issues that were beyond their control, like not being able to access Wi-Fi or having working equipment. Teachers also discussed the struggle of not being able to update student IEPs with parents during the virtual learning period due to unreliable technology.

Half of the teachers in this study disclosed that some of their students were unable to access Wi-Fi, or did not have the required equipment for virtual learning, making it impossible to teach those students. As P3 explained, some students didn't have Wi-Fi:

> Getting them hooked up to the Wi-Fi… 'cause some students didn't have it, so in some of the neighborhoods, a bus would go with the Wi-Fi connection. It would be to give Internet to the neighborhood basically, but if the bus isn't there then there's no Internet for the day.

P1 stated similarly that "many of the parents and many of the students don't have Internet. And when they do, it doesn't work very well, or they don't have reliable technology," noting the absence of working equipment for students. P2 also discussed unreliable technology being the most difficult barrier to teaching her students virtually. She recalled the challenge she experienced trying to get all her students into a synchronous virtual learning session, stating "the glitches in the technology is the first, whether it be the link wouldn't open, or we'd have everybody online, except for one, and a parent would be struggling to get in." P8 stated that her ability to work with students virtually was "a matter of whether or not they had the technology to get on." She remarked that some students did not have the required equipment for signing in to a virtual classroom, stating that they "just didn't have any technology at home besides the phone, and the phone was iffy most of the time, so they just never got on." Teachers who connected with their students through virtual sessions believed that being online with their students was beneficial to their social-emotional growth; however, this was not possible when forced to deal with unreliable technology.

Teachers reported that some students did not have access to reliable technology and working equipment due to their lower socio-economic level as a family. According to P1 and P10, the students who were on a higher socioeconomic scale had a higher probability of having working equipment with access to Wi-Fi for logging on to virtual learning sessions. P10 mentioned that her students' socio-economic level often determined whether they had proper access to the technology to reach their virtual classes, stating that "there was a line of almost like a line of haves and have nots" in the district she taught in during the virtual learning period. P1 also remarked that students who attended the Title 1 school where she taught during the virtual learning period had challenges with logging on to a reliable Wi-Fi source.

During the virtual learning period, access to reliable technology was also challenging when teachers had to meet with parents for IEP meetings. P3 stated that "we couldn't get parents to meet up; we just didn't have the resources at the time to make amendments" indicating that some students' IEPs were not able to be completed during the virtual learning period due to a lack of Wi-Fi, nor did they have the equipment to sign-in to the virtual classroom. P8 mentioned that her virtual IEP meetings were frustrating at times and had to re-start due to technical difficulties:

> Seven were virtual, five of them messed up at some point or another where we had to close down the whole meeting and start up. So, the technology is really…You can't even rely on the technology, even if it is reliable.

Teachers discussed that the technical difficulties during the virtual learning period were challenging and sometimes impossible to overcome. These challenges were often followed up with negative remarks, as P4 stated, “it better never happen again, that’s all.”

Teachers in this study discussed the challenge that some students were not able sign-in to their social-emotional virtual learning sessions because parents were not available. Some parents were considered essential workers during the virtual learning period, which meant they had no choice but to leave home for work duties. P2 remarked on the challenge of having students whose parents had to work stating that “that was very difficult because both parents were, or some parents are working” when students were supposed to be in virtual learning sessions. P8 discussed the difficulty of students being unable to sign-in to their virtual classrooms, remarking that parents who were working in essential jobs left them with few options during the virtual learning period. She stated that parents “couldn’t find anybody to babysit their kids, so they wouldn’t have access to a computer.” P10 discussed that students who were attending daycare would have teachers set them up with their virtual classroom and walk away, so “there wasn’t as much help when the child had any kind of technology issues” making it impossible for teachers to work with their students in the virtual setting.

Teachers posited that reliable technology, and a reliable source of Wi-Fi is essential to the success of virtual learning. Early childhood special education teachers believed that students must have a reliable person available to support them during virtual learning. Teachers conveyed that it was impossible to teach students without reliable technology

during the virtual learning period. Teachers believed that the additional person was needed, or virtual learning was nearly impossible.

Teachers' Social-Emotional Skills Challenge of Difficulty Monitoring

The participants expressed that students' social-emotional skills and behaviors were difficult to monitor after the transition to the virtual setting. Teachers revealed their concerns that the virtual setting was not appropriate for monitoring early childhood special education students' skills and behaviors, as teachers discovered new and undesired student behaviors emerging in the virtual setting. Teachers also discussed various distractors and the effect it had on their experience with monitoring students during the virtual learning period.

Participants recalled that their students were difficult to monitor because students have a short attention span, and they struggled to focus during virtual lessons. P5 stated that "a lot of my students cannot sit that long," also remarking on how students would leave the virtual learning area during virtual learning sessions. P4 noted the challenge of monitoring students while expecting them to sit and remain within the confines of the virtual learning space, stating:

> If a kid is frustrated, and their parent is making them sit there, I can't be like it's okay to let them go because the parent is like, "They're supposed to be learning. They're supposed to be doing this," right? And they're forcing them to stay, and the kid isn't going to learn because the kid is screaming and crying.

Concerned teachers discussed the challenge of monitoring students virtually as new student behaviors emerged. P1 discussed using virtual picture signs with her students

when they were distracted by the app microphones, saying “I had signs that would say mics off, mics on. Many times, I would have to personally turn their mics off and on.” This was a new behavior teachers experienced, and four teachers remarked that they had challenges with student microphones being on and off during synchronous virtual lessons. P6 recalled the difficulty of virtually monitoring students and keeping them interested, stating that she used props and other materials in virtual learning sessions. She further stated that she frequently traded the props and materials out because students would lose interest during lessons.

Five of the 10 teachers discussed how the transition to virtual learning negatively affected their students’ behaviors which were difficult to monitor. P1 commented on the difficulty of handling undesired student behaviors and remarked that she found that student behavior “is really hard to control over the computer.” P5 mentioned the challenge of her students’ behavioral changes while learning virtually, stating “there was no differentiation between school and home and like playing at home, doing what I want to do at home. There was no separation.” The change from the face-to-face setting to the virtual setting brought unpredicted student behaviors, as P5 stated that:

> They would unmute themselves. If I’m trying to teach, read a story, or play a story about certain social-emotional lessons, or a story exchange or anything like that, it would be difficult when kids were not taking it serious. So, I would have to start over, or redirect so, it sometimes took away from the lessons. So, that was difficult ‘cause some kids didn’t take at home learning or virtual learning serious.

P10 agreed that students exhibited undesired behaviors after the transition to virtual learning, making it difficult to monitor students virtually. Remarking that IEP goals were difficult to monitor in the virtual setting, P10 stated:

> A goal that was made to be done in a classroom with children running around with noises, with songs, with movement, with all the things that a normal classroom contains in it, it's a different setting. You're gonna see different behavior.

P4 expressed frustration with the developmental inappropriateness of expecting early childhood special education students to remain seated in front of a computer for an extended time, making monitoring restless students nearly impossible. P4 voiced her displeasure that students should not be sitting in front of a computer to exercise social-emotional skills virtually, stating:

> How are you really going to express this to a kid, right? If a kid doesn't want to sit still in front of a computer, or how are you going to get them to sit in front of a computer to even listen to you or to you know, to hear your morning meeting songs or to listen to stories that you might want to read.

P10 expressed that early childhood special education students' behaviors, like having an inability to focus on virtual learning, was challenging, stating that "the stress that was online learning at the time with three- and four-year-olds, just the limitations of gaining attention and sustaining attention to a screen" was challenging throughout the virtual learning period.

Teachers were challenged with being expected to monitor students' skills gained through watching videos and playing virtual games, while acknowledging that excessive screentime was not appropriate for their students. Six of the 10 participants voiced their concerns that excessive screentime was not appropriate. P1 stated that she recommended that students watch educational videos for social-emotional skills, but there was a point where she felt there was too much screentime because students also watched videos on their own time. P7 voiced her disdain for expecting early childhood special education students to be online for an excessive amount of time, stating "so many children, and even adults now, are so keyed into screen time that that they have lost the ability to be people, lost the ability to communicate effectively face-to-face." Also speaking on the developmental inappropriateness of excessive screentime in her students, P5 shared that educators should be reducing screentime and electronic addictions before they can even work on social-emotional skills. She stated that, during the virtual learning period, her students were "becoming more attached to screens and screen time, and so right now, it's almost like we're taking away screens, we're reducing the addiction and then we can go into the social-emotional."

There were three participants who mentioned they were unable to use the modeling strategy with their students virtually, making it a less-desirable strategy for teaching students in the virtual setting while still monitoring behaviors. P1 remarked that her students' social-emotional skills were difficult to monitor because the virtual setting left her unable to model skills for her students, which is a strategy she frequents in the classroom setting, "you have to think, when we teach how to play with somebody, we

model it. And I can't model it with myself while I'm teaching." P2 shared similar comments. P8 also mentioned that modeling skills for students while monitoring students virtually was challenging in the virtual setting. Monitoring students within the virtual learning setting was a challenge that all teachers in this study discussed. Teachers discussed the struggle to overcome this challenge as they were expected to be monitoring their students for social-emotional skills progress. The study's results indicate that they were not able to monitor their students' skills appropriately in the virtual learning setting.

Challenging Parent Involvement

Teachers believed that parent involvement was crucial in supporting students' social-emotional skills in the virtual learning period, but they did experience challenges when having to rely on the parents for support. Teachers discussed the challenge of the unavailability of parents when students were expected to be learning virtually. Teachers also voiced their displeasure that some early childhood special education students were not a top priority for learning virtually, especially if another child in the home needed to sign-in to their virtual learning classroom at the same time. Teachers also discussed the challenge of having parents who were doing the work for students.

Teachers in this study discussed challenges they experienced with those parents unavailable to be present during virtual learning sessions. Without parents' assistance during synchronous lessons, students had no help with tasks that required adult assistance, like physical prompting. P2 described, they "couldn't provide hand over hand assistance." P9 stated that her students were at the computer, but the amount of participation that the students had was limited by how much support they had at home. P9

also stated that her students "were just placed in front of the computer and that way they could listen. We prefer them to have the support; however, that was up to the parents" indicating that parents decided how much support, if any, to offer during the virtual learning period. P10 mentioned that it was difficult relying on parents to make sure their children signed on to their virtual classrooms, stating that "it was just left to, if the parent wanted to five minutes before say "my kid can't make it," then we were just okay with it." P3 expressed that the difficulty they had with parents went from one extreme of being overly helpful to not being present at all, with neither being the desired choice for teachers.

Teachers in this study did not feel as though parents believed that students at the early childhood special education level were a top priority during the virtual learning period, especially if an older school-aged child was also present in the home. P2 discussed a situation where she felt that their students were not a high priority for learning while there were older students present in the same household:

> I do think that there were older siblings in the house because it was "just preschool" even though it's early intervention and it really is very, very important. I think the things that we wanted them to do kind of got pushed back because there were middle schoolers that was running real great.

Similarly, P8 stated "we also had kids who had siblings, and those siblings were either in high school or middle school, and they had more demands on them. Nine times out of 10, they had to be somewhere at specific times."

This challenge left teachers unable to teach their students in synchronous virtual learning sessions, but it also made them feel that their students' education was less important during the virtual learning period.

Teachers also discussed that parents sometimes helped their children too much, making it challenging to know how much support their students had during asynchronous tasks. When parents were present during virtual learning, teachers found the challenge of parents completing student work and then turning it in as the student's work. Teachers were unable to tell skill progress when the work was not truly their own. As P5 described:

> I would run into problems because a lot of times the parents would say that they completed this really big project like they did this, and they did that, and they did this, but knowing that student, I would know they are unable developmentally to complete that independently.

P8 expressed that it was also difficult to assess student understanding because parents would sometimes provide answers to students off-screen:

> You could tell they would be talking above the screen so they were looking and talking to someone and then they would unmute and answer the question. And, so it's like, no, you don't want to know what Mom knows, we want to know what you know.

Though all teachers in this study agreed that the help of a parent is a necessity in the virtual learning setting, they also agreed that it is challenging when parents were not there to help or over helped their child. Teachers discussed that, though parent

involvement was crucial to student learning during the virtual learning period, the parents' behaviors were also part of the challenge that teachers struggled with at the time.

Teachers' SES Challenge on Lack of Authentic Hands-on Interactions

Teachers in this study discussed the challenge that the face-to-face setting could not be replicated in the virtual setting. Five of 10 participants in this study disclosed their displeasure with virtual learning because they felt that it was unauthentic, making it an impossible attempt to teach social-emotional skills. Three participants remarked on the importance of interactive play in the development of social-emotional skills, but teachers considered that this was impossible in the virtual setting. Teachers were also displeased with the inability to have interactive, face-to-face play sessions, lamenting that the limited hands-on interactions made it impossible to work on social-emotional skills.

Teachers in this study believed that teaching social-emotional skills to students was not an authentic way to teach them. Speaking on the challenge of the unauthenticity of virtual learning, P10 remarked:

> You can't run those scenarios that happen in real life, over a screen. I don't know really how you would mimic a lot of the real-life incidents that happen in a classroom, or not even in the classroom, at the mall, at Target, wherever.

P1 agreed that the virtual setting is not authentic, stating likewise that "you can't get the same out of being virtual that you can in person." P7 also made mention of the inability to create authentic social-emotional scenarios between the teacher and student:

> It's really hard to be emotional or social with just yourself and the teacher. There's a very different dynamic between a child and an adult than there is

> between children with each other. And so that that would be the hardest aspect of it, I would say.

P6 similarly stated that the virtual setting was an unauthentic attempt to teach social-emotional skills to her students, stating that she "couldn't observe any of their skills in real situations, everything was very artificial." P4 discussed that the lack of authenticity, and a lack of hands-on interactions were difficult because there was no way to nurture or comfort a child in the virtual setting the way you can in the face-to-face setting, stating:

> I can't give a kid a hug virtually, I can't. I can only say to them so much. "Ohh, I can really see that you're struggling, I can see that you're really sad. I can see that you're..." But what am I gonna do online, right? Like, you can't really comfort a kid.

Teachers spoke about the challenge of an inability to share social-emotional interactions with their students. Students did not have opportunities to play interactively with peers during the virtual learning period. P6 mentioned that there were limited appropriate social-emotional scenarios that students could participate in, noting that traditional face-to-face activities such as sharing toys, were non-existent in the virtual setting. She stated:

> I couldn't sit there with a group and say, 'Look, we're going to give it to your friend. Your friend's going to give it back.' We had none of that normal interactive thing making it challenging to work with students virtually.

Teachers in this study discussed that their normal face-to-face interactions did not exist virtually, making it challenging to interact with students as they did in the face-to-

face setting. P8 noted that virtual learning was difficult due to a lack of student interactions stating that, “not being face-to-face and being able to really see facial cues or social cues in person was very difficult for our kids, and so we had to work around that.” Teachers voiced discontent that the normal interactions that students experience in the face-to-face setting could not be replicated in the virtual setting. To teachers, student and teacher interactions are paramount for addressing social-emotional skills in the face-to-face setting. P9 stated that “it went from a needed to be a very hands-on situation to a very hands-off situation” indicating that the students went from being interactive to having no interactions, making it challenging to work on social-emotional skills virtually.

Teachers noted that, while teaching social-emotional skills virtually, they encountered technology issues, they had difficulty monitoring, parent involvement was challenging, and authentic interactions. This theme answers the research question. These results indicate that early childhood special education teachers struggled with challenges throughout the virtual learning period, and some challenges were impossible for teachers to overcome. All teachers revealed that they believe the face-to-face setting was more developmentally appropriate to work on social-emotional skills with their students.

Theme 3: Teachers Require Extra Assistance with Parental Involvement, Data, and Specific Strategies When Teaching Social-Emotional Skills Virtually.

The third theme focused on teachers’ need for extra assistance, mainly parent involvement, data collection methods, and virtual social-emotional skills teaching strategies. Results from interviews with teachers indicated that having parents involved is imperative for virtual learning for their early childhood special education students. The

study results indicated that the data widely reported by parents during the virtual learning period were in observations or anecdotal notes. Teachers also believed that all teachers need to be trained in virtual teaching strategies in preparation for future school shutdown.

Parent Involvement

Teachers in this study expressed that their virtual learning sessions with students included parents who were nearby and heavily involved in students' school. Nine of the 10 participants in this study insisted that it was essential for a parent to be nearby for student assistance. P10 reported that the most productive students were the ones who had a parent nearby for assistance, stating that "half parents were very involved, and half my parents weren't. I do think that the ones that had the involved parents got a whole lot more out of online learning." P9 shared a similar sentiment, stating "my sessions, I thought were very successful because I had the biggest participation in my school, as far as the kids and parents," claiming that parent involvement was necessary for her students during the virtual learning period. P4 expressed that their students required a parent to be nearby to log-on to their virtual sessions because most early childhood special education students were unable to log-on independently. P3 stated that, while her students could navigate the virtual classroom once they were online, most of her students required parent assistance with logging on. P2 mentioned that students needed parents' help to complete assigned tasks as an asynchronous virtual learning activity. She discussed having parents help students with completing asynchronous assigned tasks, stating that parents "would do it and everything they needed to complete the activities." P4 mentioned the importance of having a parent or someone there to assist when students need redirection

for behaviors or keeping them focused on the virtual learning session. Her students' parent's assisted in providing foods to students to keep them within the virtual learning space, saying that she told the parents, "Let your kid eat their breakfast while they're on the computer with me. Let them have snack; I don't care if they're eating. We can all have a snack together. We can eat lunch together." Teachers were adamant that parent involvement during the virtual learning period was crucial, even if there was minimal involvement.

Teachers in this study revealed that parent involvement was necessary for the data collection methods they used during the virtual learning period. Half of the teachers in this study mentioned that parents helped them with collecting data from their child during the virtual learning period. P2 shared that parents would provide them with information for data via email or Google Forms about how the students were doing at home. P8 discussed that her students' parents would offer feedback on skills after a lesson had been taught. Parents would share information about their children with her "to ensure that they understood the concept," so she relied heavily on what parents reported to her about social-emotional skills. P10 stated that their parents would discuss how the students' behaviors were outside the virtual learning setting, so she suggested strategies to parents for supporting their social-emotional skills at home.

Teachers indicated that parent involvement was necessary for teaching social-emotional skills virtually at the early childhood special education level. Teachers felt that their virtual learning sessions were most valuable when there was a parent available to assist their students. Parents assisted in various ways, often helping students with logging

into the virtual classroom, and they were available nearby to help during synchronous virtual sessions. Parents also helped students complete asynchronous tasks on their own time. Teachers in this study felt that parent involvement during the virtual learning period was essential for success in developing SES in students.

SES Data Collection Methods

Throughout the virtual learning period, teachers attempted to collect data for their students' social-emotional IEP goals. Teachers in this study reflected on how they collected data for student IEP goals, also remembering the challenges they had with data collection methods during the virtual learning period. P2 pointed out that raw data with percentage points was not easy for teachers because they were not physically with the students to probe for data, further noting that they relied on what parents reported to them. Teachers believed that anecdotal notes and observations from parents were the most effective methods of data collection for social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period.

P9 discussed that being in contact with their students and checking in with them during the virtual learning period was most important at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic school shutdown. Further, she explained that there was not a high priority on data collection because it was too difficult to collect data on social-emotional skills virtually. She remarked that "we weren't able, probably, to see a lot of growth because it was very difficult to do" in the virtual learning setting. P6 also discussed the challenge of knowing whether the students were progressing on their social-emotional skills during

the virtual learning period, “it made it difficult to know whether they were really gaining the skill.”

Teachers in this study expressed that students’ parents frequently contributed to their data collection and reporting during the virtual learning period. P7 shared that parents would offer their observations and anecdotal stories with the teacher about their child’s social-emotional skills. Teachers relied on what the parents were reporting was factual. Half of the teachers believed that the most effective means of progress reporting was anecdotal and observational notes that were provided by the parents. P2 revealed that, when she wrote student progress reports, “it was more anecdotal notes, not necessarily fairly reliable percentages.” P7 stated that their anecdotal data came from observations during virtual learning sessions, “I would observe how they responded to their parent or how the parent would have a child do something.” When asked how she monitored her students’ progress during the virtual learning period, P8 stated that she used “a lot of observation” during synchronous sessions or the parents would share anecdotal stories of instances that happened while they were not in virtual sessions. Further, P8 shared that parents shared their own observations with her, stating that “I would hear from parents pretty frequently, like, ‘I overheard them saying this’, when their sister took their toy or something like that.” P1 mentioned that it was easier for her to gather data on students through informal observations while in virtual sessions. P2 stated that she had assistance from her classroom paraprofessional when it was time to collect data, but also remarked on the difficulty of data collection through the virtual learning period:

> I would have to rely on my para to be like, "I've been seeing little Johnny four times, but I don't know if he was sitting there and…" I don't know, so, it was very hard to take it with fidelity on social-emotional goals.

Teachers had to quickly transition to virtual learning, leaving them with no time to prepare for how they would collect data on their students in the virtual setting. Teachers found that virtual learning left them with no means to collect traditional data since the transition meant teachers did not have the same access to their students. However, teachers communicated that the most successful data they collected were anecdotal stories from the parents and their observations throughout synchronous virtual sessions.

Virtual SES Teaching Strategies Needed

The drastic transition to the virtual learning setting left teachers feeling strongly that all teachers should be trained effectively in teaching social-emotional skills virtually, especially if schools shut down in the future. As P10 discussed, the transition was so quick, there was no time to prepare for virtual learning, stating that "it was thrown at us in a weekend and we were told, hey, you've got spring break and then we're doing it." Teachers discussed feeling unprepared for the drastic change, also mentioning how future teacher training in teaching social-emotional skills virtually would be necessary for them to feel more effective teaching in the virtual setting. Five out of 10 teachers shared that they believed that teachers should be trained in teaching early childhood special education students in the virtual learning setting. P5 remarked that trained staff in virtual instruction is essential for all teachers, noting that some teachers struggled with not

knowing how to navigate some virtual programs. P5 stated that she felt that virtual learning can work efficiently:

> When staff is trained. I feel lucky to know how to work a lot of different programs, but a lot of other teachers did not know the programs that we were given and so there were also a lot of frustrating obstacles there as well. I did feel that tension, too.

P1 also discussed the importance of future planning, stating that "they need to do a lot of research on what programs have, need to definitely plan upfront." P1 further believed that there should be plans on effective virtual teaching strategies in place if virtual learning was to be mandated again. P9 stated the importance of requiring future training for teachers to learn how to have a successful virtual learning experience, stating that "these kids can be really set off by certain things. So, training, I just think more training is needed." P8 also feels that teacher training for the virtual setting is necessary to prepare teachers for if schools close again in the future, stating that "I think I would probably just have to be trained on whatever newer programs there are." Since the virtual learning setting is vastly different than being in the face-to-face setting, teachers felt strongly that teacher training in beneficial virtual learning strategies were necessary in the future.

Teachers in this study discussed the need for additional assistance to effectively utilize affective teaching strategies during the virtual learning period. There were five of 10 teachers who spoke of the need to have additional staff involved in teaching students' social-emotional skills virtually. P5 mentioned that more staff would be beneficial to virtually support and teach students with their social-emotional needs. She expressed

frustration with not having additional help, such as a paraprofessional, for her students, stating:

> It is really hard to do breakout rooms and make sure that everyone is attempting the task that they were given. Making sure that they're paying attention by yourself with a lot of kids who can easily become distracted. Or if they need a break, returning back from their break.

P9 mentioned that having her paraprofessionals were crucial to supporting teaching strategies for students and collecting data in the virtual learning setting, stating that "I had two paras in the other room, and we would try to take data and things like that individually." P8 noted the challenge of not having anyone available to support their students when parents were not available, indicating that additional assistance was necessary in the virtual setting.

Two teachers in this study believed that observing other virtual classrooms would be beneficial for success in training teachers to teach social-emotional skill strategies virtually in the future. Participants P8 and P9 suggested that it would be advantageous for teachers to observe other teachers and their virtual classrooms so they can get ideas for their own virtual learning session strategies. P8 noted that she observed her daughter's virtual kindergarten classroom, and it gave her ideas to use for her own virtual special education classroom. She suggested that this was beneficial for her, and it would likely be useful for other teachers, stating:

> I was like, "oh, her kids are loving this." It's great. You know, they were doing online rewards and stuff. We ended up implementing them, but I had to do it differently because my kids just didn't buy into what she was doing.

Similarly, P9 shared, "One thing I think would be super beneficial is being able to go in other people's classrooms and seeing these types of things being played out in the classroom."

The third theme focused on the needs for parent involvement, data collection methods, and virtual SES teaching strategies. Results from this study indicated that parent involvement was needed to help students during the virtual learning period. Parents were necessary to help students sign on to the virtual learning platform, but they also helped to collect social-emotional data on students' IEP goals, and they helped students with completing tasks. The results in this study also indicated that teachers used observational and anecdotal notes to report student progress on social-emotional skills on their report cards. Teachers in this study believed that they should be trained in teaching social-emotional skill strategies virtually to early childhood special education students.

Summary

This study was designed to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The study's evidence informs early childhood special education stakeholders with the challenges and successes that teachers encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period; this information is beneficial to stakeholders if schools are closed, and students have to learn virtually in the future.

In Chapter 4, I included the data analysis process, and I shared the findings of this study. The Braun and Clarke (2006) coding process was used to guide open and axial coding to identify emerging themes. There were three themes that emerged from the data. The themes revealed the early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Thematic data analysis was used to answer the research question: What are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic? Following the coding process, the three themes that emerged from the data were: (a) Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, (c) Teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills virtually.

The first theme to emerge was that teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning. Teachers suggested that communication was essential for successful parent involvement during the virtual learning period. The teachers discussed various ways they communicated with parents of their students such as making forms, sending newsletters home, and talking with them during synchronous virtual learning sessions. The teachers also indicated that virtual resources and activities were crucial to successfully teaching their students social-emotional skills through the virtual learning period. Teachers discussed that they found that apps and websites provided social-emotional content that they could assign virtually to their students.

Teachers emphasized that social-emotional learning programs such as Teach Town and SeeSaw were beneficial for students during the virtual learning period. Teachers also suggested that sending materials home to students as well as shortened lessons were strategies that were beneficial for social-emotional skills while students learned virtually.

The second theme to emerge was that teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning. This theme emerged after teachers discussed struggling with challenges that included having unreliable technology and equipment, students' social-emotional skills were difficult to monitor virtually, parent involvement was challenging at times, and virtual learning lacked real and appropriate hands-on interactions. Most teachers in this study expressed that unreliable technology was challenging when students could not log on to virtual learning sessions due to a lack of Wi-Fi, or they did not have reliable equipment for virtual learning. Most teachers also expressed the frustration they had difficulty monitoring students in the virtual setting due to unexpected and undesired behavioral changes. Teachers voiced frustration that parents were sometimes difficult to work with, and they offered their concerns about challenges they had collaborating with parents of students. Teachers voiced concerns that these challenges made it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to overcome during the virtual learning period.

The third theme to emerge in this study was that teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills virtually. All teachers discussed the necessity for parents to be nearby and involved during the virtual learning period. Teachers reported that parents were responsible for

reporting progress to them. Most teachers indicated that data collection methods that teachers needed from parents were anecdotal notes and observations during virtual learning sessions. No teachers in this study had experience with teaching in a virtual setting, but half of the teachers in this study believed that training for the virtual setting would be essential for teaching virtually in the future.

Chapter 4 included an explanation of the processes taken to guarantee trustworthiness of the study by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study. An interpretation of the study's findings is included in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 also includes a comparison to the conceptual framework and peer reviewed literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2. The limitations of the study are addressed in Chapter 5, as well as the recommendations for addressing the limitations. Chapter 5 includes the areas for further potential research, social change opportunities are also discussed, as well as the study's broader implications.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The data were gathered through semistructured interviews via Zoom and phone with 10 participants who were certified early childhood special education teachers with experience teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, and (c) teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching SES virtually

Chapter 5 provides an explanation of the findings in this study as well as a connection to the literature related to the early childhood special education teachers' perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills to their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory was used to organize the research findings and to compare findings from recent literature. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research are also provided. Chapter 5 concludes with my reflections on this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Three themes emerged from the participants' responses that answered the research question addressing the perspectives of early childhood special education: (a)

Teachers noted specific resources and parental involvement as key to success in virtual learning, (b) teachers noted technology issues, monitoring, and authentic interactions as challenges during virtual learning, and (c) teachers require assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills virtually.

Theme 1: Teachers Noted Specific Resources and Parental Involvement as Key to Success in Virtual Learning

The first theme that emerged in this study was that teachers found success when teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The early childhood special education teachers in this study shared their perspectives on how parent involvement was critical for student success during the virtual learning period. The participants reported that they relied heavily on parent involvement during the virtual learning period, virtually coaching the parents to teach their children social-emotional skills at home. The participants provided their experiences with communication to parents about their child's progress during the virtual learning period. Participants also shared virtual resources and activities that they found to be useful when teaching their students virtually. In their interviews, teachers discussed educational apps and websites that were beneficial for teaching students during the virtual learning period. The findings in this study support the recent literature that teachers discovered and successfully implemented social-emotional virtual resources, activities, and strategies to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period.

Successful Virtual SES Requires Parent Involvement

Vygotsky (1978) defined the space between what a child can accomplish independently and the help they receive from the MKO as the zone of proximal development, or ZPD. All participants were adamant that their students required assistance from parents or another MKO during the virtual learning period because their help was critical for student participation in virtual learning. Parent involvement was critical during the virtual learning period, and parents' responsibilities increased to include implementing activities for children as instructed by teachers (Levy, 2023; Spadafora et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). Researchers revealed that parents who had increased engagement and participation during the virtual learning period had children who were reportedly more successful in social-emotional development (Kilag et al., 2024; Sonnenschein et al., 2022). Though parent involvement is essential to student growth in social-emotional skills, there were parents who were not confident in their teaching skills, leaving them feeling anxious and inefficient in their role (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2022). All the participants in the current study revealed that it was critical to have parents involved with their students during the virtual learning period. Participants shared that successful learning in the virtual setting was dependent on an increased amount of parent involvement during the virtual learning period. P2 mentioned that her students were more successful when parents were sitting near or behind them during synchronous learning sessions. Parents who were nearby could assist as the MKO, offering scaffolding strategies to their children when teachers were unable to during the virtual learning period.

Early childhood special education teachers' relationships with their students' parents became difficult when communication became limited with the move to virtual instruction (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022; Levy, 2023). Researchers have revealed that once apps and programs were utilized, many communication platforms were successful, and these platforms broadened opportunities for communication between parents and teachers that they did not use prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (J. Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2023; Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Levickis et al., 2023; Plotka & Guirguis, 2022). In addition to phone calls, many teachers utilized virtual communication platforms and apps like WhatsApp and Skype during the virtual learning period (Duran, 2021). Participants shared that, over time, teachers were able to communicate effectively with both parents and students through electronic platforms. This became a positive aspect of teaching social-emotional skills virtually, as it allowed for continued use of these platforms even after the virtual learning period ended. P3 remarked that communication with parents was critical through the virtual learning period, stating that "a lot of communication" with parents was critical for successfully implementing social-emotional learning in the virtual setting. Existing literature indicated that communication between parents and teachers increased with the use of programs like Zoom or Microsoft Teams once teachers settled into the new virtual position (Fettig et al., 2022; Sonnenschein et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2022). Researchers discovered that teachers believed that apps like Class Dojo are beneficial for communicating by sending messages and sharing photos or videos with parents of students (J. Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022; Gaspar et al., 2025). Aligning with the literature, participants reported that they used various virtual platforms

to communicate consistently with parents during the virtual learning period. P8 was excited to continue using some virtual platforms once she returned to the face-to-face setting, exclaiming how well she liked using them.

The participants' experiences confirmed existing literature claims that teachers did rely heavily on parents during the virtual learning period and parent involvement is essential to student success when they are learning social-emotional skills virtually. The existing literature aligns to the participants' experiences discussed in this study that communication with parents is critical to successfully teaching social-emotional skills in a virtual setting. This study's findings indicate that frequent communication with parents was critical for students to learn social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period.

Successful Virtual SES Requires Virtual Resources and Activities

Vygotsky (1978) theorized that learning occurs through using cultural tools through socially mediated learning within the ZPD. The virtual platforms served as the extension of the social learning environment, where students could engage in social-emotional focused activities. Virtual platforms that were beneficial to students' social-emotional skills were used by teachers and students to sing songs, read stories, and hold class meetings online (Daher et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2022; Steed & Leech, 2021; Stites et al., 2021). Researchers revealed that e-storybooks that are accessible on the YouTube and Zoom platforms were a popular teaching platform during the virtual learning period (J. Chen & Badolato, 2023; Ocaya, 2024; Ünlüsoy et al., 2022). Teachers utilized virtual platforms and apps to hold their virtual class meetings where students could greet peers and participate in Morning Meeting activities led by the teacher (J. Chen & Adams,

2022). Participants also discussed their experiences with various apps, virtual platforms, and the virtual resources and activities they successfully used to teach social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. Four participants mentioned using platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams for students to interact with one another in social-emotional lessons such as fingerplays and greetings. P9 shared that her students participated in greeting activities while they were on Zoom, where students could say hello and answer questions from teachers and peers.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that instruction should be tailored to the child's developmental level. Researchers reported that teachers found success with teaching social-emotional skills via early learning apps such as SeeSaw, ABC Mouse, Kahoot, EdPuzzle, and Epic (Hadley et al., 2024; Siegle, 2023; Sonnenschein et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2022). Teachers reported that some virtual educational platforms, like ClassKick, allowed students to connect with peers during the virtual learning period (Carroll & Constantinou, 2023). Ponti (2022) with the *Canadian Pediatric Society,* reported that early childhood students can benefit from increasing student learning through virtual apps, websites, and educational videos when not used excessively. P1 remarked that she linked Sesame Street videos targeting social-emotional skills to her virtual lessons. Sesame Workshop created a global initiative called Caring For Each Other, to address family needs, coping strategies, and deal with struggles while the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world (Wright et al., 2021). All of the participants in this study reported using virtual resources and activities such as websites and educational apps to help to develop social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. P5 recalled

having success with virtual task cards called Boom Cards as an interactive virtual resource and activity students to complete social-emotional tasks assigned to them. These findings suggest that virtual resources and educational apps can serve as effective tools for supporting the development of social-emotional skills in early childhood special education during periods of remote learning.

Researchers revealed that teachers sent materials home with instructions and activities attached for parents to complete with their children for lessons during the virtual learning period (Kelly et al., 2023; Philippakos et al., 2022; Sonnenschein et al., 2022). Researchers also found that teachers sometimes sent digital materials for social-emotional lessons to students via email. Hu et al. (2021) noted that these materials could also be integrated into the virtual curriculum by uploading pictures, videos, digital storybooks, and other downloadable activities. Participants reported that they went to their students' homes to drop off the proper materials they needed for virtual tasks and assignments during the virtual learning period. Five participants mentioned that they felt that appropriate materials were necessary for students to ensure success in completing social-emotional skill tasks assigned by teachers. P7 mentioned that she sent booklets home via email for parents to print out and use at home. The participants' experiences aligned with the existing research that teachers believed that having supplies and access to school materials at home was a necessity for student growth during the virtual learning period.

Participants in this study reported that they taught shortened virtual lessons for students in synchronous sessions, while the parents led asynchronous lessons at home.

Seven participants discussed that teaching shorter lessons in synchronous sessions was a successful strategy in the virtual setting partially due to the difficulty that students had so many distractions in the home. Young students in synchronous sessions struggled to focus on teacher-led lessons for long durations, leading to shorter virtual learning synchronous sessions (Fabriz et al., 2021; Plotka & Guirguis, 2022). Students struggled with being on-task as undesired behaviors increased due to distractions during the virtual learning period, making shortened synchronous lessons a successful strategy (J. Chen & Adams, 2022; Feinberg et al., 2022). P6 discussed keeping students engaged virtually by changing out props frequently, being animated, and reading books to students in shortened lessons. She indicated that this was to keep students from moving on to something else because her students' attention spans are typically short. Shortened virtual synchronous lessons that were engaging emerged as an effective strategy to accommodate students' limited attention spans and reduce the impact of distractions in the home during virtual learning.

The participants' perspectives are consistent with the literature that parent involvement is critical for success in supporting social-emotional skills during the virtual learning periods. The virtual resources, apps, websites, and activities that the participants used with their students during the virtual learning period supports teachers' experiences in existing literature. These findings reinforce the importance of both parent involvement and the use of virtual tools to effectively support young children's social-emotional development during virtual learning.

Theme 2: Teachers Noted Technology Issues, Monitoring, and Authentic Interactions as Challenges During Virtual Learning

The second theme to emerge was the challenges that early childhood special education teachers encountered while attempting to teach social-emotional skills virtually to their students. Participants revealed that students did not always have access to working Wi-Fi or working equipment, making it difficult for them to reach students and families during the virtual learning period. They also discussed the challenges encountered with the parents of students, even though parents are essential for virtual learning with early childhood special education students. Teachers disclosed that they felt virtual learning environment was not an authentic way to teach students as there was a lack of hands-on interactions that students need for social-emotional skill development in this setting.

Social-Emotional Skill Challenge of Unreliable Technology

Vygotksy's (1978) sociocultural theory posited that learning is a socially mediated process shaped by tools, resources, and interactions in a child's environment. The lack of tools and resources needed for virtual learning hindered some students from participating in virtual learning activities, severely limiting learning experiences that Vygotsky considered critical to child development. Researchers reported that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had students without access to working equipment or a reliable Wi-Fi source; teachers could not teach parents scaffolding and other strategies due to the family's lack of resources (Graves et al., 2021; Steed et al., 2022). Some families had limited or no access to technology or were unable to figure out new

platforms during the virtual learning period (Fettig et al., 2022; Gaspar et al., 2025; Steed et al., 2022). Families reportedly sought out community locations, such as McDonald's, public libraries, and fire stations, for reliable Wi-Fi access when they did not have a working internet connection at home (Gaspar et al., 2025; Lai & Widmar, 2021; Stites et al., 2021). The findings of this study align with existing literature, as all 10 participants reported experiencing challenges with unreliable technology or insufficient equipment at some point during the virtual learning period. P3 mentioned that their school district deployed buses that functioned as mobile Wi-Fi stations so their students could have access to Wi-Fi service.

The existing literature supports the study findings that teachers were challenged with being unable to reach families during the virtual learning period. Parents struggled with unreliable technology and a lack of technical knowledge during the virtual learning period, though they were expected to attend IEP meetings as well (Fettig et al., 2022; Martinez et al., 2023). Researchers have reported that there was a wide range of comfort and ability with technology among parents, making technology a challenge to meaningful participation in virtual IEP meetings (Guerrero et al., 2023; Steed et al., 2022). P2 recalled that parents sometimes struggled to sign-in to the virtual learning platforms, and students lost valuable instructional time in their live synchronous virtual learning sessions. The findings of this study support the literature that families with an inability to access reliable technology were challenging for teachers to teach students' social-emotional skills virtually.

Social-Emotional Skill Challenge of Difficulty Monitoring

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights that children develop cognitively and socially through active engagement in social interactions, and through scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable others in meaningful, structured learning environments. Based on the participants' experiences, the virtual learning period diminished teacher and student interactions, reduced instructional time, and disrupted the conditions for optimal social-emotional skill development. During the virtual learning period, young students often exhibited undesirable student behaviors during virtual learning as students became increasingly bored sitting at a computer screen (Gülmez & Ordu, 2022; Jones, 2020). Researchers discovered that distractions in the home, as well as the parents' inability to support their child, hindered their ability to participate in virtual learning sessions (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2022; Faize & Nawaz, 2020; Garbe et al., 2020). Kostaki and Karayianni (2022) posited that the home environment was not conducive to student learning as students were frequently distracted by home stimuli such as siblings and pets. Supporting the literature claims, the participants reported that they were challenged with monitoring students' social-emotional skills virtually, while they were expected to report their growth during the virtual learning period. P8 articulated that students were often distracted by stimuli in their homes, and the distracted students required more support during virtual lessons.

Researchers reported that teacher-led instructional time decreased during the virtual learning period (Godwin et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2022; Pinto, 2023). The limited time and lost time due to the pandemic resulted in learning loss and it widened achievement

gaps among students (Pinto, 2023; Wisenöcker, 2025). Howard (2024) suggested that teachers struggled to teach students because students were difficult to cognitively engage virtually. Four participants revealed that the limited time that they had with students during the virtual learning period made it difficult to monitor students in virtual sessions. P7 remarked that "preschool is hard to measure anyway because they're only there for so many hours." P1 commented similarly that engaging with, and monitoring, a whole group of students virtually was "almost impossible" due to distractions because "they had a really hard time paying attention."

Six participants reported that monitoring students during virtual learning was challenging, largely due to the excessive amount of screen time students were exposed to. P10 remarked that teachers know that excessive screentime is detrimental to young children, yet "we turn around and we said now your kid's gonna be on screen for seven hours." Researchers reported that children's screentime increased during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period, making it difficult to monitor students effectively (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021; Sequin et al., 2021). Teachers had difficulty determining the level of student progress during the virtual learning period due to the difficulties they experienced in the virtual setting (Faghir-Gangi et al., 2023; Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022).

These findings highlight challenges teachers encountered in effectively monitoring student engagement and progress during virtual learning, highlighting the need for developmentally appropriate approaches that balance screen time with meaningful assessment and interaction. The participants' experiences in this study

corroborate the existing literature that teachers struggled to monitor their students' social-emotional skills in the virtual learning setting.

Challenging Parent Involvement

Teachers in this study discussed that parents and caregivers served as an MKO, who are considered critical figures in the child's ZPD. Parents may be considered the MKO to help shape interactions within the child's environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on the participants' experiences, the parents were typically an MKO during the virtual learning period, but parents could not always execute successful social-emotional learning experiences. The participants revealed that parent involvement was essential for facilitating virtual learning at home; however, the parents' unavailability, educational background, and stress levels often limited their ability to serve as an effective MKO. P5 explained that parents did not always understand virtual learning expectations, and parents sometimes enabled undesired behaviors by becoming a background distraction. P5 expressed that parents were distracting, enabling undesired behaviors as parents "were excited that they were excited. They almost enabled it more and so then you had to stop the parents from enabling it."

Researchers reported that parents who are stressed were at a higher risk of abusing or neglecting their children during the virtual learning period (Prime et al., 2020; Sonnenschein et al., 2021). All 10 participants discussed that parent involvement was critical for student success during the virtual learning period, but they also discussed the challenges they encountered with parents. Participants shared that parents who continued to work in and outside of the home were also expected to assist students while also

concentrating on their own needs during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Parents were not always available to support their child's learning at home for several reasons, including work commitments and having more than one child at home that required them to split the use of electronic devices (Carpenter & Dunn, 2023; Hochman et al., 2022; Plotka & Guirguis, 2022). P8 revealed that if their students had an older sibling in the home, especially in middle or high school, those students typically spent more time on electronic devices because they had more demands placed on them during the virtual learning period. Researchers have reported that there was an inequity in sharing electronic devices among siblings, with older siblings typically taking precedence over younger siblings (Anakwe et al, 2021; Timmons et al., 2020). Purportedly, this led to siblings arguing over the inequity of time with electronic devices when virtual resources were limited during the virtual learning period (Anakwe et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2020). Parents were sometimes overwhelmed with virtual learning when there was more than one child learning from home, and they were expected to assist all of them at home and attend to their own personal and professional duties (Hochman et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2023). Parents encountered challenges with the increased workload teaching their children while also balancing home and professional duties (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). In one study, 38% of parents reported that they believed "too much" of their support was required to help their children in the virtual learning setting (Stites et al., 2021). Though parents believed they were being overworked with their child's school responsibilities during the COVID-19 virtual learning period, teachers needed parent

information to support their students' social-emotional growth during the virtual learning period.

Existing literature supports the participants' experiences that most parents are not trained educators, which became a barrier when they were expected to implement asynchronous lessons at home (Abuhammad, 2020). Many families prioritized their well-being over academic demands, often taking breaks from their responsibilities during the virtual learning period (Kelly et al., 2023). Conversely, participants in this study noted that parents were sometimes overly involved and, in some cases, completed their child's work for them. P5 emphasized that virtual learning posed a challenge because "students were not able to complete tasks themselves or learn how to become more independent in those areas, because the parents were doing it for them, which wasn't benefiting them." Parents sometimes lacked awareness of appropriate strategies for supporting social-emotional activities and would complete the assignments intended for their children.

The participants' experiences support literature claims that teachers experienced challenges with parents during the virtual learning period. Based on the study findings, parent involvement was critical to student success in the virtual setting. However, the participants' experiences support the existing literature that teachers struggled to work with parents due to other commitments such as work, family, unavailability of time, and trust. These findings support existing literature indicating that teachers experienced challenges related to working with parents during the virtual learning period.

Teachers' Social-Emotional Skill Challenge on Lack of Authentic Hands-on Interactions

Vygotksy (1978) believed that social interaction is the foundation of learning and development, emphasizing the importance of socially meaningful activities like interactive play, and social collaboration. Teachers reported that the virtual learning setting was an unauthentic attempt to recreate the classroom setting, as they had difficulty engaging with students and their families in the virtual setting (Marshall et al., 2020). Teachers reported that appropriate play opportunities could not be replicated in the virtual setting (J. Chen & Adams, 2022; Gaspar et al., 2025). Teachers also reported that they felt disconnected from students as they were not able to engage students in the virtual setting as they would in the face-to-face setting (Nambiar, 2020). Teachers' feelings of disconnection from their students reflect Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that learning is an innately social process, reliant on emotional bonds and communication between teachers and students. The participants' experiences aligned with existing literature suggesting that teachers found the virtual setting too challenging to teach social-emotional skills to students. Four participants remarked that virtual learning lacked developmentally appropriate hands-on interactions needed for developing social-emotional skills. P10 stated, "there's no way to mimic that real classroom experience over a computer," voicing her disdain for the unauthenticity of the virtual setting. These insights depict concerns among early childhood special education teachers that the virtual learning environment is inappropriate for interactive, face-to-face, hands-on experiences for students.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that social interactions are essential to cognitive development, and that learning is shaped by social interactions guided by an MKO. Participants expressed frustration with teaching social-emotional skills virtually, citing the lack of interactive social activities as a significant challenge. Five of the participants revealed that they did not like virtual learning for social-emotional skills because students did not have interactive play experiences with their peers, making it challenging for them to be exposed to an appropriate use of social-emotional skills. P6 explained that students did not have opportunities to participate in appropriate sharing activities, noting specifically that she "couldn't observe any of their skills in real situations." Similar to the participants' experiences, the literature has indicated that teachers believed that the virtual setting was not authentic in teaching social-emotional skills to students (J. Chen & Adams, 2022). Teachers encouraged parents to engage in play activities with their children since students had no opportunities for interactive play activities with peers at school (Duran, 2021; Kourti, 2021). However, P4 explained that some parents do not know how to play with their children by stating, "parents don't do that; they don't play with their kids, and so it wasn't comfortable for them." Teachers reportedly felt physically and emotionally disconnected from their students during the virtual learning period (Kim et al., 2021; Leech et al., 2022). Participants also disclosed their inability to interactively connect with students during the virtual learning period. Two participants were concerned that the virtual setting did not allow for nurturing and comforting interactions with their early childhood special education students. P10 remarked that some students had no ability to interact with peers like they could do in the face-to-face

setting. These insights underscore the limitations of virtual learning in supporting the development of social-emotional skills.

Vygotsky (1978) posited that learning is shaped by the social environment, and he considered learning to be a social and culturally embedded process. The study's findings emphasize the limitations of social-emotional learning activities in virtual learning while trying to create authentic social-emotional experiences for early childhood special education students. The findings support the literature claims that teachers were unsatisfied that students did not have authentic, face-to-face social interactions to increase social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period.

Theme 3: Teachers Require Assistance with Parental Involvement, Data, and Specific Strategies When Teaching Social-Emotional Skills Virtually

The third theme to emerge was that teachers required extra assistance to teach students' social-emotional skill strategies in the virtual learning setting. Participants shared that parent involvement is critical for teaching students' social-emotional skills in a virtual setting. They also discussed the data collection methods they used and felt were the most appropriate for the virtual learning setting. The participants revealed that parents reporting through anecdotal stories was beneficial to gathering data for student progress. Participants also disclosed that they believed that teachers should be trained in teaching students virtually to be successful as a teacher in the virtual learning setting. Teachers shared various teaching strategies that they felt were supportive of students' social-emotional skills in the virtual learning setting. The findings of this study support the

literature that teachers do require extra assistance when teaching social-emotional skills to students virtually.

Parent Involvement

Vygotsky (1978) believed that an MKO assists in supporting student learning by guiding them through lessons, modeling behaviors, and reinforcing learned skills. In this study, the participants' experiences reflect that parents who were present and engaged in meaningful learning experiences were more successful during the virtual learning period. Similarly, researchers suggested that students who were more successful during the virtual learning period had parents who were actively involved by sitting nearby and working with students (Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Kurth & Nuru, 2023). Other researchers reported that parents better understood their child's learning capabilities during the virtual learning period as parents spent more time with their child (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2022). Students with supportive, hands-on parents during virtual learning were more successful, especially when parents understood the material and were engaged in learning activities with their child (Sari & Maningtyas, 2020; Shin & Puig, 2021). Aligning with the literature, nine participants indicated that having a parent nearby during virtual learning sessions was critical for success in teaching social-emotional skills. P6 remarked on parent involvement during the virtual learning period, noting that "the parents were always there" to assist. P10 similarly stated that "there was always a parent right off screen" to help support the students during the virtual learning period. In their interviews, when participants were discussing supportive parents, they generally

spoke positively of those students whose parents were actively involved during the virtual learning period.

Existing literature indicated that many families were unable to provide the same level of support for their children's education during the pandemic, due to increased demands such as work obligations, mental health challenges, and concerns about the health of family members (Kelly et al., 2023; Steed et al., 2022). As parental obligations related to virtual learning increased, some parents became overwhelmed and disengaged from supporting their child's learning due to exhaustion and stress, resulting in limited or no support for students (Kelly et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, participants emphasized that parent involvement was essential for collecting and reporting data on student progress during the virtual learning period. P2 described the difficulty of working with students whose parents were unavailable, noting that having a parent nearby was critical for supporting virtual instruction. P10 explained that much of the IEP data was gathered through anecdotal information shared by parents during synchronous sessions. Because teachers could not consistently observe students directly in the virtual environment, parent input became a vital source of information for monitoring student progress (Lambert & Fitzpatrick, 2022; McKenna et al., 2023).

The participants' experiences support the existing literature that parent involvement and support is critical for students to be successful in increasing their social-emotional skills virtually. The existing literature and participants confirmed that parents who were nearby in the virtual setting had students who were more successful in learning

social-emotional skills. The study's findings include the essential role of parent involvement in supporting social-emotional development during virtual instruction.

Data Collection Methods

Vygotsky (1978) posited that learning is socially mediated through collaboration with others and must be understood in the context of the learning environment. During the virtual learning period, teachers were expected to report student progress even though students were physically at home. Parents' responsibilities with schoolwork increased during the virtual learning period, including collaborating with teachers to track IEP data and report the progress for their children (Sonnenschein et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). Teachers collaborated with parents about students' social-emotional experiences, and parents reported the successes and challenges their children had. P6 stated that she was dependent on parents' input about student progress when synchronous virtual lessons were not in session. The literature indicated that some parents did not feel that they were efficient in teaching their children at home during the virtual learning period (Garbe et al., 2020; Stites et al., 2021). Whitley and James (2025) reported that parents struggled to support their children's learning, feeling inefficient in the new teacher role.

Participants revealed that teachers relied on observations, offering collaborative input to teachers since teachers had limited direct interactions with students. Early childhood special education teachers in this study reported that they relied heavily on anecdotal and observational data to track progress on students' IEP goals. Four teachers noted that they primarily used observation to collect student data during the virtual learning period. P9 explained that she monitored students by "watching them on the

screen," adding, "We had to rely on a lot of looking at body language, facial expressions, things like that." Half of the participants emphasized that parent involvement was essential for accurately reporting student progress in the virtual setting. P7 shared that she provided virtual social-emotional instruction to each student for 30 to 45 minutes per week, and parents typically supplied progress data during those sessions. Reportedly, teachers used virtual observations as a method of student assessment due to the difficulty of probing information for progress on students' social-emotional skills (Callaway-Cole & Kimble, 2021; J. Chen & Adams, 2022; Gurung, 2021).

Student assessments became a collaborative process, as teachers relied on parents to provide information about students' social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. The participants and existing literature similarly indicated that data collection for students' social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period was comprised mostly of anecdotal and observational notes supplied by parents. These findings emphasize the reliance on anecdotal and observational data collection methods.

Virtual Social-Emotional Skills Teaching Strategies Needed

Teachers in this study reported that they were not adequately trained to feel efficient in teaching social-emotional lessons virtually to their students. Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning is a life-long process that is socially mediated and culturally influenced by an MKO. Existing literature has shown that teachers believed school districts needed to improve their support by providing more training, professional development, and resources for virtual learning (An & Zakaria, 2022; Catalano et al., 2021; Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Researchers found that teachers who received virtual

teaching training prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had more positive perceptions of virtual learning practices (Hemdan-Mohamed & Mohamed-Marzouk, 2022; Starks, 2022). Studies also showed that professional development opportunities enhanced teachers' competence in supporting student learning in online environments (An & Zakaria, 2022; Anis, 2024; Starks, 2022). Despite this, many teachers lacked appropriate virtual instruction training before and during the pandemic. Yet, evidence suggested that ongoing training is critical for improving teachers' virtual instruction skills (Ford et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022; Steed & Leech, 2021). Participants confirmed these concerns, noting that the abrupt transition to virtual learning made it challenging as they were expected to use unfamiliar programs and applications to access and deliver social-emotional lessons. None of the early childhood special education teachers in this study had prior virtual teaching experience; however, half emphasized the importance of training if educators are expected to teach in virtual environments in the future. P5 remarked, "I felt lucky to know how to work a lot of different programs, but a lot of other teachers did not know the programs that we were given, and so there were also a lot of frustrating obstacles there." The participants believed that training teachers to teach virtually is necessary for teacher and student success when teaching social-emotional skills in the virtual learning environment.

Feeling overwhelmed with virtual learning responsibilities, four participants revealed that they believed there is a necessity for additional adult assistance in the virtual learning environment. P8 discussed that assistance from her paraprofessional was beneficial in grouping students for virtual lessons mentioning that "those were the really

sufficient lessons, and then we would get together again with the other grade level and my para" for a whole group lesson. The demands of teaching students virtually increased teachers' work-related stress and the additional stressors can lead to teacher burnout (Stang-Rabrig et al., 2022). Glessner and Johnson (2020) reported that teachers believed that administrative support was necessary for providing clarity to teachers and for ensuring a successful virtual learning experience. Researchers also found that teachers believed administrators should be supportive to teachers during virtual learning to lessen the emotional toll and uncertainty, if the forced school shutdown should recur (Steed & Leech, 2021). P3 stated that it would be helpful for teachers if administrators clearly communicated their expectations for how social-emotional skills should be taught and reinforced in a virtual setting. Teachers believed that support from meeting with their colleagues was beneficial to their support system during the virtual learning period (Glessner & Johnson, 2020). Participants emphasized the importance of increased support from both administrators and colleagues to navigate the challenges of teaching social-emotional skills virtually and to enhance the effectiveness of their virtual instructional practices.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and collaboration with assistance from an MKO. Colleagues, paraprofessionals, and administrators offered guidance and support during the virtual learning period. The findings reflect Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory by highlighting the role of collaboration and guidance during the virtual learning period. The experiences of the participants support the existing literature that training and professional development in

virtual learning is necessary for teachers to teach students' social-emotional skills virtually. These insights emphasize the importance of providing teachers with virtual teaching strategies that would ensure effective delivery of social-emotional instruction to early childhood special education students in the virtual learning environment.

Limitations of the Study

This basic qualitative study had three limitations that may have influenced the scope and interpretation of the findings. The first limitation was the potential for researcher bias, recognizing and avoiding my own personal bias given my background as a former early childhood special education teacher. To help minimize this bias, I used a reflective journal to organize data notes throughout the interview period.

A second limitation to the study was the participants' schedule and ability to participate in the interview process. Teachers who were overwhelmed in their positions refused participation in this research study or did not respond to requests for an interview. The Walden University Participant Pool and social media sites where early childhood special education teachers were members were used to recruit additional participants. Participation was limited to teachers who had the time, capacity, and willingness to participate in the study. The snowball sampling method was used to reach saturation.

The third limitation in this study was the participants' willingness to share their perspectives honestly. Discussing professional challenges may have influenced the depth of the participants' responses in interviews. To address this limitation, I emphasized the voluntary nature of the study, assuring participants of my confidentiality and anonymity procedures.

Recommendations

Based on the existing literature and participants' experiences teaching social-emotional skills to students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period, further research is recommended to examine specific activities and strategies used by teachers. Additional research is also recommended to determine more specific needs of teachers during virtual learning. The study's findings support the critical need for peer interaction, and parent involvement in supporting young children's social-emotional growth in the virtual setting. The results of this study may help early childhood special education stakeholders if schools are closed in the future and students are forced to learn virtually. Existing literature and the participants' experiences indicate a need for students to experience teacher and peer interactive experiences in the virtual learning setting. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning is a social process, where knowledge is created through interactions with others, especially more knowledgeable individuals. Literature and the participants' experiences stress a need for dependable virtual strategies where students are afforded interactive opportunities for social-emotional skill development.

Based on the study's findings, further research is needed to determine specific strategies for collecting data on social-emotional skills virtually. Virtual environments profoundly change the quality of social interactions as compared to the face-to-face setting, presenting challenges to monitor student social-emotional growth effectively. Successful data collection methods should capture the quality of social interactions that facilitate social-emotional development aligned with sociocultural principles. The nature

of social interactions changes significantly in the virtual learning setting, making it more complex to observe and assess the development of social-emotional skills. Further research is required to identify the most effective strategies for collecting data in the virtual setting for students whose developmental needs require more intensive interactive experiences for social-emotional learning.

The participants' experiences highlight a critical need for ongoing, targeted professional development activities to prepare early childhood special education teachers with skills necessary to teach social-emotional skills in a virtual setting now and in the future. The participants expressed a need for professional development, peer collaboration, and administrative clarity. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of the ZPD, or the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with support. The findings in this study align with this perspective by highlighting the critical role of collaboration, professional development, and administrative support in helping teachers acquire the necessary skills for virtual instruction.

Implications

The results of this study include several positive implications for change, specifically for early childhood special education teachers, administrators, students, and parents of students. Early childhood special education teachers and administrators may apply the results of this study to reflect on participants' lived experiences that were both successful and challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. Administrators in early childhood special education may use the results of this study to

determine successful and beneficial resources necessary for virtual learning. Administrators can also use this information to determine and address the highest needs of early childhood special education teachers during current and future virtual learning periods.

With these results, the parents of early childhood special education students may recognize that their involvement is crucial to their child's success in the virtual environment. Vygotsky's (1978) belief was that MKO's are influential on student learning through shared and cultural experiences. During the virtual learning period, parents were the MKO in guiding students through the learning process. Sociocultural theory has its limitations in the virtual setting, but the belief is that virtual learning will be viewed more positively and more beneficial as society evolves (Liu, 2024). Sociocultural theory applied in the 21st century implies that students can increase knowledge virtually with an MKO; however, there is no evidence for how teachers should engage with students in the virtual setting (Liu, 2024). This is needed as many schools continue to use virtual learning when teachers commit to monthly professional development, during illness outbreaks, and in times of inclement weather and/or natural disasters when it is not safe to travel.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood special education teachers who taught their students during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. For this study, the research question I explored was: What are early childhood special education teachers' perspectives on teaching students

social-emotional skills during virtual learning due to COVID-19 pandemic? The study's findings and a review of the literature affirmed that teachers who taught virtually found success with parent involvement, virtual activities, and resources. These findings and existing literature also provide insight into the challenges that early childhood special education teachers struggled to overcome during the virtual learning period. Teachers in this study provided critical information that is significant to the future success of teaching social-emotional skills to early childhood special education students in the virtual learning environment.

There were three themes that emerged in data analysis. In Theme 1, teachers found virtual social-emotional skill learning success with resources and parent involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. In Theme 2, teachers encountered challenges with technology, monitoring, and authentic interactions among peers and teachers when teaching social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period. In Theme 3, teachers required extra assistance with parental involvement, data, and specific strategies when teaching social-emotional skills virtually. Utilizing Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, these findings revealed both challenges and successes encountered by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic virtual learning period. The evidence from this study may be used to inform early childhood special education administrators and teachers of successful virtual instructional strategies, professional development, and policy decisions to improve student learning during current and future school closures. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how to successfully support early childhood special education teachers in the virtual

learning environment to improve student learning and develop their social-emotional skills.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol Guide

Interviewee: _____ Location: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

School (during the virtual learning phase of COVID-19): _____

What did you teach at that time? (Job title, grade level): _____

Is this your current job title and/or role? Yes or No

If not, why did you leave that role? _____

Several studies have presented literature that indicates that early childhood special education teachers struggled to teach their students via the virtual learning format when schools were forced closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining an understanding of your challenges, obstacles, successes, and overall perspectives of teaching social-emotional skills in the virtual format will help teachers like you, in the future, should early childhood special education students be expected to learn via the virtual format in the future. The results of this study may contain information that will be beneficial to students and teachers in the early childhood special education field.

You have been identified as someone who is qualified to participate in this study. I am interested in hearing your perspectives of teaching your students' social-emotional skills in the virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information you will share is important, but voluntary. This means I will respect your decision if you do not wish to continue participation. You may stop the interview at any time, including prior to the start date/time. You may skip questions that may make you feel uncomfortable or too personal. I will not inflict any harm on you. The interview is scheduled to last for 45 to 60 minutes, and it will be audio recorded.

Introduction and Background:
Thank you for volunteering to share your insights and experiences of your time teaching your students' social-emotional skills during the virtual learning period while schools were closed. I'll begin by asking you some background questions to get to know you better.

A. Questions about participant's background:

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What is your educational history (include schools, degrees, certificates)?
3. How much experience did you have with virtual instruction prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

4. What is your current teaching position?

B. Interview Questions:

1. What are two critical social-emotional concepts that you believe your students must master before they leave your classroom?

2. How did switching to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic change the way you taught social-emotional skills to your students?

3. Describe what a typical social-emotional virtual learning session looked like for your students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Explain how you monitored your students' progress on their social-emotional skill development during the COVID-19 virtual learning period.

5. How did you address your students' social-emotional skills on their IEPs after the move to virtual learning?

6. Tell me about two of the most beneficial strategies supporting social-emotional skills (including apps, programs, or websites) that you implemented during the COVID-19 virtual learning period.

7. What were two of the biggest obstacles you faced while attempting to teach social-emotional skills through the COVID-19 virtual learning period to your students?

8. What resources or training do you need before you are fully prepared to teach social-emotional skills through virtual learning again in the future?

9. How do you think teaching social-emotional skills through virtual learning can be more successful for all early childhood special education teachers and students in the future?

Possible qualifying prompts:

1. What do you mean by __?
2. Can you elaborate on __?
3. You mentioned __. What are your thoughts on that?
4. Tell me more about __.
5. Can you give an example about __?
6. Given __, how do you feel about that __?