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Neurodiverse Secondary School Educators Transitioning to Online Teaching During COVID-19 Pandemic

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Walden University

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Leane Pupo

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Walden University

2026

Abstract

Neurodiverse Secondary School Educators Transitioning to Online Teaching During

COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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MA, American Public University, 2012

BS, University of Central Florida, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected individuals, families, communities, and a variety of workplaces across the world. Many studies have addressed the impact of the emergency transition from on-ground to online on educators, students, and their families. However, while there is emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 on neurodiverse individuals and on neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, there is little or no research on neurodiverse teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of neurodiverse educators who transitioned from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy and Garmezy's theory of resilience guided the research design. Eight participants who identified as neurodiverse were asked to describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and to reflect on the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability. An interpretative phenomenological research design and analysis were used for this study. Findings revealed themes related to emotional strain, technological and pedagogical challenges, relational disruption, leadership impact, equity-driven concerns, and instructional adaptation. Participants described both vulnerabilities and strengths, showing resilience, reflective insight, and adaptive problem-solving despite significant stressors. Insights from this study may contribute to positive social change by providing insights from this diverse population of educators that may influence the further development of appropriate training, accommodations, and inclusivity.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family; my mom and dad for never doubting me, my abuela and abuelo that always bragged about me, my husband for always supporting me and keeping me focused, and my three children that inspire me every day to be the best version of myself.

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This research was inspired by my career as an educator and all of us that faced and persevered through the global COVID-19 pandemic. My children taught me that, like them, I am neurodiverse and that our experiences are important and need to be considered across all personal, academic, and social aspects.

I would like to thank my mother for being the first person in our family to go through a doctoral dissertation process while balancing a family and a career. Her experience and words helped guide and encourage me each step of the way.

My gratitude to Dr. JoAnn McAllister for her commitment, support, feedback, and encouragement. My gratitude to Dr. Medha Talpade for her kindness and interest in my research that helped my confidence in working with a unique and important population. They each pushed me in different ways, were patient when I could not focus, and helped me center myself. They taught me how to reflect on what was important and showed me the tools that led to my success.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected people in all professions around the globe and has had impacts on individuals and families in a variety of ways. As communities, individuals, and professionals have adapted to this impact, studies have emerged to understand how the pandemic has affected diverse groups. Educators around the world had to suddenly change from traditional face-to-face settings and move to virtual teaching platforms for an extended time during the pandemic.

While there is emerging literature on the impact of the pandemic on students, families, and educators, the experiences of neurodiverse educators who transitioned online during the critical year of 2020 have not been studied. The purpose of this study was to explore how neurodiverse educators experienced this transition to online teaching. Insights from this population may help facilitate methods of improvement in the workplace for neurodiverse individuals and educators. It may also contribute to positive social change in the event of a future global catastrophe as we look to find deficits across different fields.

This chapter discusses relevant literature related to the lived experiences of neurodiverse teachers transitioning from on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, there is a description of the nature of the study and its theoretical framework, followed by discussions of the scope and limitations and its potential significance.

Background

On March 13, 2020, 166 countries, including the United States of America, decided to shift from face-to-face education to online and closed schools at all educational levels on March 26. The decision to move to distance education peaked to 177 countries on April 1st, 2020 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020, as cited in Sari & Keser, 2021). Thus, it has been termed Emergency Remote Education (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021). This was an effort to minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and educational lives of citizens around the world.

Several studies have discussed the experiences and transition for teachers from traditional face-to-face education to distance learning strategies (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021; Güneş & Toran, 2021; Jayman & Lynam, 2024; Sari & Keser, 2021; Spain et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). According to Eroğlu and Şenol (2021), there was little preparedness during the transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, teachers generally had no guidance in revising curriculum, courses, infrastructure, and other elements necessary for a successful transition.

The lack of preparedness also affected the quality of educators, and retention, and has various community effects (Baker et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers' experiences in the classroom believed that it affected the educational and emotional needs that students received, with COVID-19 being more of a focus than "normal issues" children face like growth, learning, and emotional needs (Baker et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021)

There is a growing body of research on the experiences and perceptions of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021; Güneş & Toran, 2021; Jayman & Lynam, 2024; Sari & Keser, 2021; Spain et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Although researchers have investigated this issue from a variety of perspectives, there was little or no research on the specific experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have shown that adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) struggle with issues regarding executive functioning, social interactions, and sensory issues and benefit from additional support and resiliency training (Guy et al., 2020; Kornblau et al., 2019).

Some studies have described the challenges of neurodiverse professionals and the challenges this population faces with executive functioning, anxiety, job retention, and difficulties with transitions (Das et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019). For example, individuals with a neurodiverse condition have faced adversity in the workplace (Das et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019). Research on resilience has indicated that exposure to stressors or adversities may either increase vulnerabilities through a sensitization effect or decrease vulnerabilities through a steeling effect (Rutter, 2012). It has also been found that individuals with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be more resilient in the face of adversity (Rutter, 1987). While these studies have offered some insights into neurodiverse professionals' experience in the workplace, there is little to no research on neurodiverse educators that includes their perspective during this period. Specifically, not much is

known about their experiences and the additional challenges in the workplace they may have faced.

Problem Statement

The lack of knowledge about how these individuals were affected by the transition to online teaching limits understanding of neurodiverse educators and their experiences. For this population, unexpected challenges can lead to further anxieties and barriers for these individuals in performing work effectively (Das et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019). According to Saline (2021), offering positive feedback to neurodiverse, alternative learners is essential for encouraging their efforts and acknowledging their accomplishments during this time of ever-changing and uncertainty as they struggle with transitions. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns also created a significant loss of services and support for many specific communities, including the autistic and neurodiverse community (Spain et al., 2021).

Lack of knowledge about the experiences and perceived effects on the adaptability, resiliency, and self-efficacy of neurodiverse secondary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic means that there was a portion of educators that may face additional challenges in the workplace and may also be underserved in their need for support during unexpected transitions. This lack of knowledge about the experiences of neurodiverse educators in the workplace limits the ability of school administrators to work effectively with this population.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how neurodiverse educators experienced transitions to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions for this study focused on the perceptions of these educators and how this experience affected their adaptability, resiliency, and self-efficacy. Interviews with neurodiverse secondary school educator provided insight into their specific experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting specific issues faced by neurodiverse educators during the COVID-19 pandemic that are separate from other workplace events and transitions, this interpretative phenomenological study can aid in the future creation of career development tools, supports, and strategies that are inclusive to all educators.

While this study did not aim to understand all the challenges and intricacies of neurodiverse educators in the workplace, it is important to understand the experiences of this population during a major event like the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential effects on the field of education. Insights from this study may improve the understanding of the experiences and perceptions of neurodiverse secondary educators transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this study may help school administrators better understand this population of teachers and highlight the topics of building resiliency and adaptability in the field of education.

Research Questions

The following research questions (RQs) were used to guide this study.

RQ1: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe the lived experience of the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt?

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks grounded this study including Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, focusing on the self-efficacy of individuals as educators, and Garmezy's (1991) resiliency theory, focusing specifically on neurodiverse individuals. Bandura's theories on self-efficacy have been used across all fields to discuss an individual's beliefs in their ability to perform any task. Garmezy's resiliency theory originated with patients suffering from mental illness and their ability to adapt. While Garmezy developed a theoretical framework for resilience, Rutter worked with Garmezy and continued his work on resilience and coping across the lifespan. Garmezy, as cited in Rutter (1987), concluded that there are three sets of variables that function as protective factors: (a) personality features that include self-esteem, (b) family cohesion and a lack of discord, and (c) the availability of external support systems that encourage and reinforce a child's coping efforts. Longitudinal studies have shown that having good interpersonal relationships had a significant effect on resilience from childhood through middle-age and can be applied to relationships across this period (Rutter, 2007).

These two theories are the most logical selections for framing this research study as they emphasize self-efficacy and resiliency. Bandura's and Garmezy's theories have shaped and guided the research design by focusing on the self-efficacy, resiliency, and adaptability of individuals as educators. This includes the development of the RQs and

proposals for data collection and analysis. These theories kept the data collection and analysis focused on neurodiverse educators' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding their self-efficacy, resiliency, and subsequent adaptability. By interviewing neurodiverse secondary educators and applying Gadamer's philosophy on interpretative phenomenology, this study may provide a greater understanding of the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of these three theoretical frameworks appear in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

To address the RQs in this study, a qualitative approach was selected. The characteristics of qualitative research begin with assumptions and a framework, either interpretative or theoretical, that inform the study of the research problems that address the meanings people ascribe to a social or human issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To study this issue, researchers in a qualitative study use an approach to inquiry that is sensitive to the people and places of interest in a natural setting. The analysis of the data needed to be both deductive and inductive to establish patterns and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A quantitative approach was not selected for this study because it would lack the depth necessary for exploring the lived experiences of neurodiverse educators during the pandemic. While surveys can provide a general picture of feelings and perceptions, they lack the understanding and interpretation of the individuals being studied during a particular phenomenon.

The specific research design was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with interviews of neurodiverse secondary educators. The aim was to explore the

lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. IPA is concerned with understanding personal lived experiences and the relatedness to or involvement of individuals in a particular event or phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

In this qualitative study, I used a small sample of individuals to explore their lived experiences of a particular situation. I recruited eight neurodiverse secondary school educator participants for individual interviews. Interviews provide deeper insights into an individual's experiences; thus, the use of interpretative phenomenological investigation was best suited to exploring and identifying the specific issues of neurodiverse individuals as secondary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview protocols were developed to answer the RQs. The data included their responses regarding experiences transitioning to online teaching and their perceptions of the effects on their self-efficacy, resiliency, and adaptability.

As a neurodiverse educator, I could capture both aspects of interpretation and understanding by helping identify, and empathizing with the participants, as well as understanding and making sense of their experiences. This allowed for a richer analysis of the study, which can only be done through an IPA (see Smith et al., 2022).

Definitions

Adaptability: The capacity to make appropriate responses, modifications, adjustments, or changes to one's behaviors to meet different circumstances and changing situations (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Camouflaging: Also known as social camouflaging, it is the use of strategies to compensate or mask characteristics of autism during social interactions (Hull et al., 2020).

Compassion fatigue: The negative aspects of an individual's professional quality of life that includes the constructs of burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (Yang et al., 2021).

Emergency remote education: The transition from on-ground traditional education to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by urgency and a lack of preparedness (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021).

Neurodiverse: Individuals with non-neurotypical conditions like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), ASD, and a variety of learning disabilities (LD), and are considered alternative learners (Spain et al., 2021).

Resiliency: The process by which an individual successfully adapts and adjusts to a challenging situation or life experience through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Self-efficacy: An individual's belief in whether they can successfully complete a task. It is moderated by performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura, 1977).

Assumptions

When conducting research, there will always be philosophical assumptions and beliefs. Because these assumptions can assist in selecting theories to guide the research study, we must be aware of the assumptions and decide whether or not they are actively

incorporated into the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The philosophical assumptions that underly this study are ontological, epistemological, axiological, and the assumptions related to the specific method. The ontological assumption was that each participant would have their own reality. The intention of this study was to share these multiple realities through the reported experiences of each participant, identified themes, as well as actual words from the participants to present differing perspectives (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The epistemological assumption is related to how close the researcher is to the participants being studied, “knowing what they know,” and minimizing “objective separateness ” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a neurodiverse secondary educator who taught before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, I am in the field being studied and assume to have some similar experiences.

The axiological assumption is value-laden, discussing personal values, biases, the ethics and respect of the participants' rights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One assumption was that neurodiverse educators would provide honest answers about their experiences transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another assumption was that they would provide their honest perceptions of how this transition affected their self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability. Being a neurodiverse secondary educator, I valued the perspectives and voices of these educators and recognized the importance of their experiences being heard. This study was an IPA requiring my interpretations of their interpretations.

Lastly, there are methodological assumptions that require revisions using inductive logic. RQs can change in the middle of a study to better adapt to the experiences of collecting and analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were neurodiverse secondary educators sharing their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies used to reduce the impact of these biases and assumptions are addressed in Chapter 3.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was the lived experiences of a purposefully selected participant pool of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned from on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic and were living in the United States. The scope was limited by the need to narrow the sample to neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned online during the COVID-19 pandemic for the first time, meaning they had experience teaching on-ground prior to the pandemic, but were not experienced in teaching remotely prior to the pandemic.

The delimitations of the study are related to the focus on neurodiverse secondary educators, as it is a population that has not been studied in the field of workplace education. Neurodiverse individuals have faced adversity in the workplace (Das et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019). The focus of this study was to address the lack of knowledge about the experiences and effects on the adaptability, resiliency, and self-efficacy of neurodiverse secondary school educators who transitioned to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is emerging research on educators during the pandemic, this population of neurodiverse

educators has not been studied. This study is also limited to neurodiverse secondary educators. Further research can investigate neurodiverse educators in primary education as well as postsecondary educational settings. Perspectives from stakeholders, such as administrators, students, families, and support staff were not collected because the focus of the study is on the neurodiverse secondary educators that experienced the transition of on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

Qualitative research is by nature interpretative research. The researcher is "typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 260). Findings of the study relied on both the perspectives and interpretations of experiences by the participants and the researcher; as such, the results may not be generalizable to other contexts or populations. The dependence of participant engagement can also impact the reliability and dependability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This qualitative investigation is specific to neurodiverse secondary school educators who transitioned from teaching on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a neurodiverse secondary school educator who worked during the pandemic, I needed to be aware of and reflect on my personal biases and experiences. Reflexivity required noting my past experiences with the research problem, participants, or setting and how these past experiences could shape my interpretation during the study regarding themes and looking for evidence to support my positions or my conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because the intention was to specifically do an IPA, I took detailed notes of my interpretations of the participants' responses with thick descriptions

(see Smith et al., 2022). A key part of the hermeneutic circle is the continued revision of my fore-conceptions and understanding that during the study new information presented itself and could change the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon (see Gadamer et al., 2004).

Because IPA uses small, purposive samples to produce idiographic depth, the limited sample size restricted the range of perspectives represented. Some participants also self-identified as neurodiverse, which was appropriate for phenomenological inquiry but introduced variability in diagnostic history, support needs, and personal understanding of neurodiversity. Additionally, all participants were working within a single Mid-Atlantic state during the COVID-19 pandemic, including educators from three different counties and one charter school. Differences in district policies, technology access, and local conditions influenced the transferability of the findings. Data relied on retrospective self-reporting, which may have been shaped by memory, emotional distance, or meaning-making that evolved over time. Finally, the study did not include a neurotypical comparison group, which limited the ability to determine which experiences were unique to neurodiverse educators and which were shared across the profession.

Significance

This study is significant in that it fills a gap in understanding the experience of neurodiverse educators transitioning to online teaching and their perceptions of how this affects their self-efficacy, adaptability, and resiliency in the workplace. While there is literature discussing the effects of stress, perceptions, and the need for training for educators and new research is focusing on educator transitions during the COVID-19

pandemic, there is no literature focusing specifically on neurodiverse educators (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021; Güneş & Toran, 2021; Sari & Keser, 2021). Neurodiverse individuals face an array of challenges in the workplace without needing to have sudden transitions and additional stressors added that have been shown to affect their performance at work (Guy et al., 2020; Kornblau et al., 2019). The results of this study could aid educational administrators in ensuring that the needs of all educators are met. Educational institutions face many challenges due to inequalities among both educators and students. By better understanding and working towards identifying experiences faced by all individuals within the system will promote social change. Due to the diversity of educators, supporting their mental health and well-being can improve education for their students and can further increase the diversity of educators. Having neurodiverse educators that are supported by the administration can also help provide support to the population of neurodiverse students. Having a better understanding of the effects of transitions in the workplace can also help with collaboration among administration and educators, between educators, as well as curriculum development and classroom management.

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a great need for research into the effects of a global crisis on education as well as other fields of study. Within education, there have been several studies on the challenges faced by teachers, their experiences, and their perceptions. The neurodiverse population has faced challenges of its own. The study of the experiences of neurodiverse educators transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was introduced in this chapter. The following RQs were selected

for this study: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe the lived experience of the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt? Bandura's (2001) and Garmezy's (1993) theories guided the research design by focusing on the self-efficacy, resiliency, and adaptability of individuals as educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of the theoretical frameworks for this study relating to self-efficacy and resiliency by Bandura and Garmezy, respectively, are offered. In Chapter 2, I review recent studies on educator experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, and strategies to support neurodiverse individuals in the workplace.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Educators from all over the world during the COVID-19 pandemic needed to transition from on-ground traditional teaching to online/remote teaching and faced several challenges (Baker et al., 2021; Cardullo et al., 2021; Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Jayman & Lynam, 2024; Keser & Sarı, 2021; Schultz & Love, 2022; Trust & Whalen, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Several additional studies discussed experiences in the transition to online learning and feelings of lack of preparedness for this transition by educators (An et al., 2021; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). Other studies focused on strategies for improving professional development and transitions from on-ground to online (Lichtenstein & Phillips, 2021).

Neurodiverse individuals experienced a disruption of their routines and services during the COVID-19 pandemic (White et al., 2021). The neurodiverse community also encompasses a small percentage of the workforce across a variety of fields. The challenges these individuals face in executive functioning, social workplace interactions, difficulties with transitions, and anxieties are documented in current literature ((Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2021; Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). While Das et al. (2021) explored the experiences of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are currently no studies on neurodiverse educators and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this chapter, I discuss current studies related to teacher experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of preparedness and professional development needed, as

well as what effective professional development for educators would look like, neurodiverse experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, neurodiverse masking and camouflaging, and lastly recommended workplace accommodations for neurodiverse individuals. Bandura's self-efficacy theory and how it relates to resilience and adaptability is discussed. Garmezy's theory on resilience with the continued work of Rutter and other researchers is also discussed in this chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

The keywords and databases searched included *educators' experiences* or *teachers' experiences* AND *COVID-19 Pandemic* or *Coronavirus educator support* or *training* or *professional development* or *administration support* AND *online learning* or *e-learning* or *distance learning*, *COVID-19* or *Coronavirus* AND *educator work-life balance* or *self-efficacy* or *resilience* or *resiliency theory*, *educator experience with technology* or *classroom management* AND *online education* or *e-learning neurodivergent educators* or *neurodivergent professionals* or *professionals with ASD* or *professionals with ADHD* AND *COVID-19* or *Coronavirus*, *educator transitions online during COVID-19* (modified to include only past 5 years and peer reviewed sources) in the databases ERIC, SAGE journals, and a Thoreau multidata base search.

The search process was iterative. While there were studies on educators or neurodiverse individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no studies found specific to neurodiverse educators whether during or before the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical frameworks of Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory,

as well as Garmezy's resiliency theory guided the literature review strategy. While some studies used qualitative methods like interviews and surveys, many were quantitative using scales to assess feelings of self-efficacy. Qualitative studies conducted using IPA methodologies were also considered for refining the search and to align with this current study. Additionally, early research into educator experiences during the pandemic was conducted outside of the United States indicating a need for more in-depth qualitative studies into the experience of neurodiverse educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical frameworks for this study were Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory regarding self-efficacy and Garmezy's (1993) theory on resiliency. According to Bandura (2001), people are conscious and purposeful and are not simply reactive. When they are faced with a task they act mindfully, they reflect on what is wanted of them and evaluate their future or past actions. People will naturally set personal goals that will please others or themselves, if there is a challenge, they either engage in positive and encouraging self-talk or negative and debilitating self-talk. Failures depend on their perception. If it is something they can overcome they will put in more effort, if it is something they perceive is insurmountable, they can turn into beliefs of personal deficiencies (Bandura, 2001). If people perceive they are being disrespected, coerced, manipulated, or exploited, they can respond with apathy, hostility, or defiance. While people are agents of their own thoughts and behaviors, social and environmental influences have a major impact (Bandura, 2001). Forethought allows people to plan a

course of action to produce a desired outcome and avoid a detrimental one based on their prediction of consequences for a prospective action (Bandura, 2001).

Planning is essential. Several of the recent studies regarding educators during the COVID-19 pandemic find that their self-efficacy is impacted by their lack of resources and proper planning, training, and professional development regarding their sudden transition to online teaching (An et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022; Sari & Keser, 2021; Schultz & Love, 2022; Trust & Whalen, 2021; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023; Yang et al., 2021). Bandura's social cognitive theory influenced the design, interview questions, and data analysis for this current study by using targeted questions on how the experiences of neurodiverse educators during the pandemic differed from their workplace experiences prior to the pandemic. This also allowed further understanding of the impact of the educational environment, support, and social interactions on the neurodiverse educators in comparison to their neurotypical counterparts during this transition.

People will self-evaluate to match their personal standards and goals to give themselves direction to sustain their efforts. Accomplishing things aligned with these goals and standards can give satisfaction and pride. Perceived self-efficacy is critical to adaptation and change because these beliefs impact whether a person will think pessimistically or optimistically. This can either be self-enhancing or self-hindering. A keen sense of coping efficacy can reduce a person's vulnerability to stress and depression in challenging situations. It also can strengthen a person's resiliency to adversity (Bandura, 2001).

Even early researchers found that individuals with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to be more resilient in the face of adversity (Rutter, 1987). Yang et al. (2022) found that educators during the COVID-19 pandemic reported higher levels of self-efficacy when they experienced a sense of connectedness to colleagues and administration. This is also supported by research that shared plight empowers individuals to heal as a group and reduces maladjustment (Brendgen et al., 2013, as cited in Yang et al., 2022). The resilience activation framework is a model to promote individual and community resilience in order to increase the recovery from a disaster as well as reduce psychopathology (Abramson et al., 2015). Research across school-based helping professions during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that sustained emotional strain often coexisted with adaptive coping and resilience, particularly when organizational support and clear communication were present (Hale et al., 2023).

Garnezy's developed his theories on resiliency from patients suffering from mental illness and their ability to adapt. Garnezy (1993) discussed how vulnerability represented the heightened probability of maldevelopment due to one or more risk factors, including, genetic, biological, sociocultural, economic, behavioral, or demographic. He stated how several studies on disease focus on understanding how these factors contribute to the activation and sustainment of disorders (Garnezy, 1993). Garnezy, however, was interested in how even in the presence of these risk factors, there could be adaptive outcomes due to positive elements within the individuals and their external environments that serve a protective function. This adaptability to adversity is resiliency (Garnezy, 1993). While neurodiversity is not a mental illness, it is an atypical

way of processing information and perceiving the world. This has shown to affect different aspects of a person's life including the workplace (Das et al., 2021; Kornblau et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2021; Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). Understanding the perceived adaptability and resiliency to adversity of neurodiverse educators during the pandemic can give us a more complete picture of the effect of these emergency situations on educators; thus, the creation of the research design and questions.

Rutter (2007) also concluded that research demonstrated that resilience was not a function of gender or higher IQ but of good relationships, cognitive styles, and coping. It is important to look at individual differences regarding response to stress or adversity. Additionally, a person can be resilient with some environmental hazards but not others and can be resilient with respect to some outcomes but not all outcomes (Rutter, 2007). A study on nurse educators during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that their level of resilience is tied to their experiences with online education, life-experiences that have enhanced coping skills for older educators, frequent checking-in with other faculty, and self-care (Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022). Overall, social cognitive theory and resiliency theory were central to the research approach, design, question, and analysis of the current study by exploring the experiences of the online transition during the pandemic for neurodiverse educators and their perceived effects on their self-efficacy, resiliency, and adaptability as educators.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The key concepts of this study are related to educator experiences and perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of preparation for transitioning to online

teaching required during the pandemic, how neurodiverse teachers were not specifically a focus of research, specific challenges of the neurodiverse educators, need for programs and strategies that may support this population. The literature review addresses teacher experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of preparedness – professional development, and neurodiverse experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic with subtopics of neurodiverse individuals in the workplace, neurodiverse masking and camouflaging, and neurodiverse workplace accommodations.

Teacher Experiences During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic forced governments to implement large-scale social restrictions including the closing of schools and universities across the globe. Students and educators needed to transfer partially or fully to an online format (Warshawski, 2022). Educators from all over the world experienced disruptions to their traditional method of teaching regardless of age taught or years of experience. To determine the way to overcome the crisis in education caused by the pandemic, it was necessary to document, analyze, and learn from these reported experiences (Güneş & Toran, 2022). The digitalization of information and the use of technology has been increasing over the last few decades, including its use in educational settings. For this reason, many schools across the globe were able to make the rapid transition to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021). This was referred to as remote emergency education (ERE) with most experiences being online education through applications like WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, and others like Education Information Network (EIN)

created by the government of Turkey to allow educators and students to connect with learning and teaching resources (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021).

In an American study by Cardullo et al. (2021), the researchers studied K-12 teachers' remote teaching self-efficacy during the pandemic. The technology acceptance model and its relationship to remote self-efficacy were examined using a questionnaire. The three open-ended questions allowed the educators to express their feelings about the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges related to teaching remotely during this time (Cardullo et al., 2021). Challenges reported were due to a lack of interaction with students, a lack of motivation by students, communication difficulties, trouble with internet connections, and a lack of support and resources to teach online and engage students. Teachers also reported low self-efficacy in using technology to teach online. The advantages they reported were flexibility for teachers with working at their own pace and comfort, more customization and differentiation for the learners, and added resources used to support learners when in-person teaching was not available (Cardullo et al., 2021). The perceived usefulness of the learning management systems (LMS) and the systems quality (like internet speed) and ease of use for online learning was a predictor of the educators' level of teaching self-efficacy in remote teaching.

Additionally, the support from their school and district along with their perceptions of the usefulness of the LMS predicted their feelings of self-efficacy to facilitate and engage student learners in remote settings (Cardullo et al., 2021). Sarı and Keser (2021) claimed, "The teachers and students in Turkey, as in many other countries, were forced to an emergency transition from traditional classes to online classes without

an adequate time for preparation” (p. 252). In an international study regarding emergency remote teaching, the researchers had 91% of their participants from the United States, and the remaining 9% were from different countries across the globe (Trust & Whalen, 2021). While no teacher responded the same, there were themes that emerged on cognitive, social, affective, and identity (Trust & Whalen, 2021).

Ninety-one percent of the teachers reported learning new skills with technology and the need to adapt (Trust & Whalen, 2021). Teachers also reported feeling that, with the support of other educators, they could meet the challenges of the pandemic. Collaborating with colleagues allowed them to better manage the workload. They also reported feelings of loss of identity in not being in the classroom and needing to know how to separate work from personal time (Trust & Whalen, 2021). Many teachers felt they needed to be available 24/7 and that this was unhealthy. While they learned innovative technologies, they felt ill-prepared to use them in effective ways for teaching (Trust & Whalen, 2021). Sarı and Keser (2021) interviewed 17 classroom teachers regarding their experiences with online teaching during the pandemic. They evaluated teachers’ experiences in terms of technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK). The TPACK framework is the intersection of pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and technological knowledge. Sarı and Keser found that despite teachers being experienced and evaluating themselves as competent in pedagogy, content, and technology in the classroom, they reported feeling incompetent regarding the expectation of combining technology with pedagogy and content knowledge. While information and communication technologies (ITC) are common in modern educational settings,

technology changes rapidly whereas pedagogy and teaching practices do not. The effectiveness of educators teaching online profoundly affects the abilities of students to learn; thus, the pandemic highlighted the need for integration and training into TPACK for current and future educators (Sarı & Keser, 2021).

In 2022, Schultz and Love studied the experiences of K-12 educators who were forced into online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, only 43% of teachers felt prepared to effectively utilize information and communication technology (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021, as cited in Schultz & Love, 2022). Furthermore, it is estimated that in the United States, only two-thirds of teacher education programs include TPACK. The aim of the study was that the results could help inform professional development and teacher preparation programs by learning what effective practices and strategies were used by remote educators during the pandemic and what can be learned from their initial experiences (Schultz & Love, 2022). The 18 participants were certified teachers across New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland with classroom experience varying from less than 5 years to more than 15 years. More than half of the teachers indicated that their school district provided significant support with required meetings as well as opportunities for collaboration and professional development and that this led to their feelings of autonomy and success through the challenges faced. The educators also reported learning more about technological tools that could help their classrooms as well as having more opportunities to learn and explore cultural and family differences. The struggles reported surrounded around lack of organization and time management from

students and families, access to reliable internet and devices for students and families, as well as supporting families through the pressures and challenges of the pandemic (Schultz & Love, 2022).

In the study by Eroğlu and Şenol (2021), the researchers examined the experiences of teachers with emergency remote education (ERE) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants varied in their gender, subject taught, also referred to as branch, and professional seniority or years of service. The results analyzed the types of ERE used by teachers during the pandemic, the effectiveness of the ERE, as well as suggestions by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers found that even though educators used ERE to share documents and lessons, there were several infrastructure problems where students and teachers could not access the information with the system often crashing due to the volume of students and educators online. Several teachers believed that online learning was ineffective and expanded inequity in education. Low internet speeds and lack of devices and tools caused many students to not engage in ERE. Many teachers used alternative methods like WhatsApp to engage parents in their children's learning. Students with low responsibility and motivation were least engaged. Other beliefs for the ineffectiveness in ERE were the conflicts in scheduling and that certain curriculums are not suitable for online learning (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021).

In another study in Turkey, researchers interviewed 11 preschool teachers about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results on the interviews highlighted challenges in three areas: (a) children's access to and their use of distance

learning tools, (b) the access and use of parents' to distance learning tools, and (c) the proficiency of the teacher's technological and pedagogical field knowledge (Güneş & Toran, 2022). Like the results from Eroğlu and Şenol (2021), the preschool teachers expressed the challenges of access to the EİN/EBA by the students. They could not access or use the tools provided within the platform or did not have computers or devices to use. The educators often resorted to using WhatsApp to provide lessons to the families. One educator expressed that the preschool children and their teachers were the last in order of importance of school-aged children. The EBA was not used in the preschools, as reported by a teacher, and they indicated that "the state should provide the technical infrastructure to deal with these technical issues" (Güneş & Toran, 2022). The parents had similar challenges accessing EBA to support student learning. Many did not have computers and even with some teachers attempting the use of Zoom, the families preferred the use of WhatsApp, as they were more adept and accustomed to using this application for communication (Güneş & Toran, 2022). Lastly, the teachers themselves indicated that they also had little experience using technology for distance education. This was also their first-time using these platforms and needing to create lessons for distance learning. They expressed their lack of experience and training and questioned whether or not they were effective (Güneş & Toran, 2022).

In Chile, the education of teachers is tied to cultural and socioeconomic status. Due to the pandemic, K-12 schools in Chile closed 2 weeks after the outbreak began in Chile. Teachers had to create online lessons even though 50% of Chilean students has occasional or no internet access (Fernández et al., 2022). In an effort to guarantee

education to K-12 students, the Ministry of Education partnered with television channels to broadcast educational programming, printed worksheets, and replaced standardized tests with voluntary exams to assess students' learning and socioemotional conditions (Fernández et al., 2022).

However, the study by Fernández et al. (2022) also highlighted that these socioeconomic inequalities also affected the students at the university level. Teacher educators worked within their universities to provide resources to their students, in this case preservice teachers, as they struggled with internet access and a lack of technology. This highlighted a need for social justice as the pre-service teachers had the same challenges that faced the younger cohorts of students in Chile. The results indicated reduced participation, difficulty in staying connected between teacher educators and preservice teachers, a disparity in living conditions and resources, and challenges in supporting new teachers in their learning and development of curriculum planning (Fernández et al., 2022). Part of a teacher's education comes with support from the teacher educator that monitors and assists them in adapting to the needs of the students and family. The COVID-19 pandemic affected this interaction by limiting the interactions to ZOOM interviews, many times in which the students had their screens off. This also led to feelings of isolation and burnout. Teacher educators were working more hours than prior to the pandemic in order to be accessible, host ZOOM meetings, and plan additional lessons (Fernández et al., 2022).

An IPA study regarding the experiences of transitioning to online teaching for university staff was conducted in England (Jayman & Lynam, 2024). Three higher

education instructors were interviewed following Smith's IPA methodology. The educators all experienced transitioning to online due to the pandemic. One educator had 2 years of teaching experience at the time and the other two had 15 years of teaching experience. There were four group experiential themes (GETs) that emerged: transition was a traumatic process, relationships were a source of support and strain, opportunities for learning and growth, and surviving and inspiring the mental wellbeing environment (Jayman & Lynam, 2024). The instructors felt that successful transition from face-to-face to online teaching requires planning, resources, and training. Without it, the experience was "traumatic" as it left educators stressed with the unexpected shift in workload, the method of delivery, and destabilization of normal work hours and routine. They also reported feeling they lacked power or agency over their time and that their work was now being micromanaged (Jayman & Lynam, 2024).

As in other studies, strong and supportive relationships with colleagues and others on social media had a positive effect as did age and experience (Jayman & Lynam, 2024; Yang et al., 2021). However, there were strains experienced by two of the three educators that received "'academic gaslighting' (professional invalidation)" from their managers (Jayman & Lynam, 2024). The experience of this left them describing feelings of negativity and hopelessness that impacted their confidence and had them questioning their abilities to perform their professional roles effectively. Which indicated that academic gaslighting could lead to emotional stress, low self-esteem, loss of confidence, and diminished self-efficacy (Jayman & Lynam, 2024). The educators also felt that while they faced challenges using technology for the full online transition, they felt that they

could see the benefits of harnessing the additional use of technology in hybrid and blended teaching pedagogies. Being able to adapt from the stressors, challenges, and trauma and learn from the experience was seen as an opportunity for personal and professional growth (Jayman & Lynam, 2024).

In a larger American study conducted by Yang et al. (2021), 321 educators in California completed online survey regarding their feelings of school-connectedness, compassion fatigue, and online self-efficacy using Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework. The study found that school connectedness was positively associated with online teaching self-efficacy as teachers were able to connect with colleagues and administrators and collaborate. However, they found that attempting to connect with families were energy-draining job demands creating additional difficulty and stress correlated compassion fatigue. A subconstruct of compassion fatigue is burnout (Yang et al., 2021). According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, an individual's cognitive perception, personal factors, behaviors, and environment all function as determinants of their adjustment outcomes and have a bidirectional influence on each other (Bandura, 1989, as cited in Yang et al., 2021). It is recommended that educators have various resources available to provide various channels for connections, clear norms and guidelines for communication and set working hours. For the overall well-being of the educators, it is important to learn the signs of compassion fatigue and develop more self-care practices. These strategies and connections can also be a part of professional development and mentoring support (Yang et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by Baker et al. (2021), New Orleans charter schoolteachers were surveyed on various stressors and protective factors. Teachers that reported more stressors experienced worse mental health and found it harder to cope and teach during the pandemic. Those that had more protective factors reported less negative impact from stressors and reported better mental health. Online teaching challenges and lack of connection were the greatest challenges faced. While support from coworkers and administrators was the most helpful (Baker et al., 2021). While a comparison was made of White versus Black teachers and the stressors experienced, there was no significant difference in the number of stressors reported but there were differences in the types of stressors reported. Approximately 85% of teachers reported the stress of separation from family and friends regardless of race. Black teachers reported more difficulty with added workload, while White teachers reported more of a challenge transitioning to working from home (Baker et al., 2021). Teachers reported that the lack of connection they felt reaching their students emotionally and academically in a virtual classroom was the most challenging aspect of the pandemic, followed by the difference in skills needed to teach from online to in-person. A lack of student and family resources posed a major challenge as well as balancing teaching from home with personal and family demands for the teacher (Baker et al., 2021). The more helpful and positive factors and experiences reported were support from coworkers followed by administration. Teachers reported feeling appreciative of the flexibility and understanding of the challenges faced during this time. The use of technology resources allowed teachers to stay connected to their students and families giving them the opportunity for deeper connections. While also

providing teachers to feel supported and connected with other teachers online within the United States and abroad that were experiencing distance learning due to the pandemic (Baker et al., 2021).

In 2023, Webb and Baumgartner provided questionnaires and interviewed student teachers and early career teachers on their experiences during COVID and remote teaching, the stressors they faced, and what resources were helpful. The teachers interviewed all had less than three years of teaching experience. The sample included teachers that ranged from teaching fourth to 12th grade (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). While novice teachers reported training in technology as a strength not shared by all teachers during the pandemic, many stated they discovered technology tools on their own. Despite this reported level of comfort with technology with novice teachers, they found using it to engage students in a meaningful way for remote learning to be challenging. They reported feeling uncertain about what a “good remote learning lesson” would look like (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). Novice teachers reported support from their colleagues, administrators, and the larger teaching community to be the most helpful. There was collaboration and shared resources and brain-storming opportunities between the teachers. There was support in relationships and opportunities for check-ins with other educators and administrators (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). A challenge novice teachers reported was learning how to separate their spaces and time to create boundaries for work and for personal self-care. They also reported the benefit of care and support from outside of their work and colleagues with family and friends being the most common (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). The novice teachers reported that the need for

training on technology and tools was not as important as the professional development needed on how to leverage technology tools to engage and support remote learning and teaching (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023).

Another American study, by Nurse-Clarke and Sockol (2022), explored the resiliency reported among nurse educators during the COVID-19 pandemic using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale 25 (CD-RISC-25). Resilience has often been explored in terms of behavioral health but has applications across all fields with studies on nurses and nursing educators having previously been conducted (Barker et al., 2018, as cited in Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022). There were 375 respondents to the survey. They found that instructor respondents that were over the age of 50 reported higher levels of resilience with the possibility of this being due to more coping skills enhanced by life-experience (Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022). However, there is a discussion that educators between 31-40 years of age could have more distractions at home such as childcare, which was not explored in the study but could be a mediating factor. Level of education also had a positive impact on resilience as well as previous experience with teaching online. It was not years of teaching experience but specifically with prior experience teaching online that showed a significant increase in resilience. Training and professional development for online education is essential (Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022).

A mixed-methods study was conducted in the United States surveying teachers across 25 different states with follow-up interviews of 13 teachers from 10 different states regarding their experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and their perspective on the “new normal” after the pandemic to help better prepare teachers in the

event of future emergencies (An et al., 2021). The teachers revealed that the greatest challenges were a lack of student and family participation and engagement, students without technology access, lack of face-to-face connections with students, concerns for student and family well-being, no work-life balance, and the need to learn new technology. Teachers also expressed the need for better professional development and training for online learning for both educators and students, improved access to technology, as well as action plans and communication (An et al., 2021).

Lack of Preparedness – Professional Development

The resilience activation framework is a conceptual model for social resources to promote adaptation and rapid recovery in post-disaster settings (Abramson et al., 2015). According to the framework by Abramson et al. (2015), several government agencies have looked for ways to enhance individual and community resilience to prepare populations in advance for disasters whether technological, natural, or manmade supported by the research on resiliency over the last 50 years. Research began with understanding how children thrive despite growing up in adverse conditions and the factors and traits that enable children to achieve appropriate developmental milestones and avoid psychopathology even when faced with this trauma and adversity (Garmezy et al., 1984; Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1979, as cited in Abramson et al., 2015). The framework illustrated that exposure to harm leads to resource loss, stress, and psychological reactivity; most people are inherently resilient or have the capacity for it; community resilience interacts with individual resilience; access and engagement to social resources can activate resilient attributes; activation of these attributes takes place

in sociocultural context; and that individual, community, and sociocultural environments in regards to adversity can be measured (Abramson et al., 2015). This framework and the challenges reported by educators of feelings of lack or preparedness, the need for training and professional development, and the effects on their self-efficacy further points to the need of promoting and planning for emergencies (An et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022; Sari & Keser, 2021; Schultz & Love, 2022; Trust & Whalen, 2021; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023; Yang et al., 2021).

Effective methods for professional development (PD) and the education of teachers have long been studied. As technology advances, more PD opportunities arise for educators. In 2012, engineering was adopted into the science curriculum in K-12 schools in the United States of America (Lichtenstein & Phillips, 2021). *Effective Teacher Professional Development* published by the Learning Policy Institute noted the following seven characteristics for effective professional development of teachers: (a) content focused; (b) incorporates active learning using adult learning theory; (c) supports collaboration, typically using job-embedded context; (d) uses both models and modeling for effective practice; (e) provides coaching and expert support; (f) provides opportunities for feedback and reflection; and (g) is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Many effective PD programs will provide positive student gains with most but not necessarily all seven of these characteristics. However, several programs have successfully incorporated all these principles simultaneously (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Lichtenstein and Phillips (2021) studied three cohorts of K-12 science teachers attending a National Science Foundation (NSF) professional development program for

engineering at the same University. While the NSF explicitly states that all of the Stanford Research Experiences for Teachers (RET) programs must be conducted in-person at a college or university, they made an exception in 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lichtenstein & Phillips, 2021).

The researchers compared two of the NSF-funded RET program cohorts that were conducted in-person to one that was conducted 100% online. The researchers wanted to determine the extent of which the seven-characteristics for effective PD by Darling-Hammond (2017) into the programs and what the immediate outcome differences, if any, would be between the in-person and online cohorts (Lichtenstein & Phillips, 2021). The results indicated that all seven characteristics were incorporated into the program regardless of cohort. It also indicated that the program outcomes were achieved across all cohorts. The main difference reported was the overall experience. In-person cohorts were able to work firsthand in the labs and work side-by-side with their instructors, teacher-fellows, and lab assistants. The online cohort was more focused on research and data-analysis. The online cohort also lamented not being present in the lab and suggested cameras to allow for better interactions with the lab if future online sessions were created. They also expressed the desire to have face-to-face interactions with their teacher-fellows and instructors. Lastly, a returning teacher-fellow expressed that while they did learn a lot, the experience was not the same and that they missed being able to connect and interact more with those involved in the program (Lichtenstein & Phillips, 2021).

Neurodiverse Experiences During COVID-19 Pandemic

Several studies have been conducted on the effects of the pandemic on neurodiverse children and their caregivers. There was a disruption of the routine in social and mental health services due to the pandemic. In a study by White et al. (2021), researchers examined the experiences and perspectives of caregivers of children with ASD on using telehealth for the first time. However, finding studies on neurodiverse professionals or adults during the pandemic was challenging as very few studies have been conducted.

Neurodiverse Individuals in the Workplace

In the following examples, neurodiverse individuals have been studied in various workplaces. In 2019, Kok et al. studied the prevalence of adult ADHD in active-duty Army personnel. The initial belief was that the rate of ADHD would be higher in the younger 18- to 19-year-old age-group. However, the results indicated that the adult ADHD symptoms are common in Army personnel and that the 25 to 29-year-old age-group had a 1.5 times higher prevalence rate of ADHD than their younger counterparts (Kok et al., 2019). This is significant to this current study in that ADHD is not simply a childhood mental health concern but one that can be life-long and affect various workplaces.

In 2021, Rowe et al. studied the lived experiences of adults in the workplace with an ADHD diagnosis. The methodology was an IPA using semi-structured interviews, which is the methodology selected for this current study. The researchers believed that this would provide a deeper understanding of their insights and perceptions while using a

smaller sample size. Five out of the seven participants interviewed received an ADHD diagnosis after the age of 30. All of the participants worked for the NHS (Rowe et al., 2021).

While studies have found that many adults with ADHD are at a greater risk for work-related stress, absenteeism, frequent employment changes, lower wages, and are less likely to advance through promotions, healthcare workers with ADHD have an average of 12.4 years of workplace tenure as compared to other professions with average tenure of 6.41 years (Rowe et al., 2021).

Four themes emerged in the study: social environment (relationships) - professional-professional and professional-patient, physical environment, behavioral, and work tasks. The results indicated that the relationships between professional-professionals lead to more feelings of imbalance and are more challenging to navigate. In some cases, they reported lower self-esteem or assumptions that their colleagues and managers viewed them negatively (Rowe et al., 2021). These challenges and feelings within the workplace about judgments and discrimination from employers and coworkers can lead to more anxiety (Kornblau et al., 2019). Those participants who felt that their employers were supportive and understanding, reported feeling empowered, valued, confident, and capable and were more productive. Their more positive self-perceptions came from their professional-patient relationships by attributing a stronger sense of personal causation and satisfaction. In these relationships, the participants reported bringing traits of altruism, professional integrity, passion, and purpose to the position (Rowe et al., 2021).

The physical environment also affected the participants by causing distractions and feelings of being overwhelmed by the external stimuli or lights, conversations, and other sounds. There was also an apparent struggle with the participants acknowledging the need for support or being conflicted in using workplace accommodations (Rowe et al., 2021). This is similar to the reported feelings of being overwhelmed and distracted by working remotely (Das et al., 2021).

Behavioral traits in ADHD were reported to either be positive by allowing them to be hyper-focused, efficient, creative, and full of ideas or negative like being impulsive, impatient, difficulties in motivation and initiation of activities, as well as trouble with anxiety and self-regulation. Work tasks also showed the dichotomy in ADHD traits. Work that was more stimulating and interesting drew in the participants whereas computer work, for example, was more difficult and boring. However, work that was overstimulating could cause the participants to feel overwhelmed, lose focus, and freeze (Rowe et al., 2021). It is the combination of these positive and negative traits that leaves employers feeling that while they can benefit from this inclusivity, they are also wary about how to meet these workplace needs with accommodations (Albright et al., 2020)

The results indicated that there are a lot of workplace challenges that are faced by adults with ADHD and there are intrinsic and extrinsic factors that can affect the resilience and occupational performance of these employees. Also, the participants reported that they often look to fit into the workplace environment that they have by making their own accommodations like going to an area with reduced external distractions. In turn being in less supportive environments also leaves these individuals

feeling unsettled and dissatisfied with the desire to move on. This is supported by an unstable work history that is often reported in adults with ADHD (Rowe et al., 2021).

A qualitative study in Israel focused on the perspectives of tertiary-educated women with ADHD in the workplace (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). The women worked in a variety of workplace settings, some were employed full-time and others part-time, some were single, some married, and some with children. The women reported having been employed between 1 and 10 workplaces with the average being 4.5 workplaces (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). This further supports an unstable work history for individuals with ADHD (Rowe et al., 2021).

Schreuer and Dorot (2017) identified four themes in their study: (a) feelings of being different because of “an invisible disability”, (b) difficulties coping due to job demands and the workplace environment, (c) personal strategies as well as environmental accommodations, and (d) the experience and significance of employment. The women reported the need for stimulation in the workplace with job duties like meetings becoming boring and frustrating. They would lose interest in the job and either quit or feel obligated to stay to make a living. There were also reports of difficulty with emotional and behavioral self-regulation due to frustrations and feelings of being overwhelmed. These feelings led to perceptions of being a failure and having lower self-esteem. Behavioral impulses like quitting without notice, moving away, returning to start the cycle over again, or more commonly, having impulsive speech. Participants reported interrupting the conversations of others and causing additional friction in the workplace (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017).

In a 2019 study done by Kornblau et al., researchers recruited autistic adults with a self-reported diagnosis of autism, from a healthcare provider, living in the United States. These adults completed an online survey using open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of barriers to work. The results indicated that anxiety posed a significant barrier as well as issues of executive functioning, the discrimination they face from others, sensory processing issues, as well as difficulty with social interaction. They also faced difficulty with interviewing and hiring. These challenges with the employment process, difficulty with social interactions, and discrimination were both contributors to and influenced by their reported feelings of anxiety (Kornblau et al., 2019).

Neurodiverse individuals often experience difficulties in executive functioning processes that manage goal-oriented behaviors like inhibitory control, planning, cognitive flexibility, and attention. They can also have specific communication needs, preferences, and sensory sensitivities (Das et al., 2021). These aspects of neurodiversity can fundamentally impact professional work tasks and communication and are backed by statistics of lower job stability of neurodiverse employees and higher rates of unemployment (Das et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic affected various workplaces and career fields and working remotely became a more mainstream practice for many organizations. In a 2021 study by Das et al., researchers sought to understand the work-from-home practices of neurodivergent (i.e., neurodiverse) individuals. They reported their findings on 36 interviews of neurodivergent professionals who worked from home during the pandemic. Several of the participants made comparisons of working in an open office layout pre-

pandemic and then working from home. They stated challenges in an open office setting from being full of distractions and stimulation to feelings of anxiety as if they were being watched for how they worked since their work style could be vastly different from their neurotypical counterparts. This often resulted in the neurodivergent employee seeking an alternative workspace like a conference room or local café. The participants also reported that some of their self-accommodations like wearing headphones were either ineffective at reducing the open office chatter or were deemed as “rude” by their coworkers (Das et al., 2021). The participants often reported that they felt judged by their coworkers as if they were dismissing them or ignoring them because they needed to resort to “working in supply closets” to help them focus. This is like the findings of Rowe et al. (2021) when employees with ADHD needed to create their own accommodations and find spaces to reduce external distractions.

The participants in Das et al.’s (2021) study reported that while they did have more control over their home office environment while working remotely, they still faced challenges finding the best workspace. This sometimes took multiple attempts. One interviewee reported feeling like being by a window would be a “good idea” to get a pleasant view and sunlight. However, they were then distracted by random thoughts or people walking around outside. They found a windowless room with a nook to be a more suitable option. Participants also reported other challenges like having family at home, too. Again, the pandemic brought employees home, but also those they live with. The sounds of remodeling or family disruptions were distractions that could affect workflow and time management. Neurodiverse individuals are more likely to have neurodiverse

family members, too. One participant with ADHD discussed how his two sons both have ADHD and are on the spectrum; they also face challenges with social filters and often burst into the “office” to have their needs met (Das et al., 2021). There are also challenges to finding dedicated workspaces that are not in communal areas or used for eating or recreational activities. Also, the challenge of wanting to separate the workspace from the area to relax like the bedroom. Participants reported feeling that this could affect their productivity as well as mental health (Das et al., 2021).

However, it was not only the challenge of finding the right physical environment to work in but also the distractions that came from the virtual workspace. Remote meetings created distractions from the conversations with background stimulations as well as observing and attempting to read the facial features and gestures of the other participants. There are also the distractions of persistent notifications in the digital workspace (Das et al., 2021).

Neurodiverse Masking and Camouflaging

Camouflaging and masking is the deliberate use of strategies employed by individuals with ASD in order to hide the characteristics of autism during social interactions (Hull et al., 2020). A study by Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) found that autistic individuals camouflaged in either formal settings like the workplace or a medical setting, or in informal settings like with family and friends. The common reasons for engaging in camouflaging were “fitting in and passing in a neurotypical world,” “avoiding bullying and retaliation,” “concerns about impression made when not

camouflaging,” out of habit, or personal internalized stigma like feelings of shame or inadequacy (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

A systematic review of the literature, including 29 studies on camouflaging by autistic children and adults, found gender differences in camouflaging, adults with higher self-reports of autistic traits engaged more in camouflaging efforts, and more self-reported incidents of camouflaging was associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Cook et al., 2021). Autistic females tend to report more incidents of masking during social interactions than autistic males (Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2020). Females with ASD tend to go undiagnosed and miss related services and therapies. Their efforts to mask their autism by camouflaging is one of the reasons theorized that there is a gender difference in presentation and diagnoses for ASD (Cook et al., 2021; McQuaid et al., 2022). Many females are either misdiagnosed, not diagnosed or receive a late diagnosis of ASD if they do not have another underlying intellectual disability (McQuaid, 2022).

These camouflaging efforts are used during everyday social interactions and situations in order to adapt to the social demands of the environment, however, they also come at the expense of emotional exhaustion and are masking and not treating the underlying social difficulties (Cook et al., 2021). Camouflaging essentially creates a mismatch of external social and behavioral challenges and the lived experiences of individuals with ASD (McQuaid, 2022).

While individuals with autism experience levels of anxiety, depression, and social anxiety, high usage of camouflaging and masking strategies are associated with an

increase in generalized and social anxiety and, thus, worse mental health outcomes, regardless of gender (Hull et al., 2021).

Neurodiverse Workplace Accommodations

Even before the pandemic, employers have been looking for ways to enhance their workforce talent and be more inclusive. This includes accommodating the needs of the individuals they hire for their particular workplace settings. They have found that neurodiverse individuals can help spur innovation but that there also needs to be consideration on proper communication and meeting their needs (Twaronite, 2020). Albright et al. (2020) discussed employers' concerns when hiring individuals with ASD. It is suggested that these concerns of social communication challenges, cognitive inflexibility, and sensory sensitivities can be addressed through disability diversity training, vocational rehabilitation programs, and employee accommodations. Many young adults with ASD feel conflicted about sharing their diagnosis with their employers or coworkers because of stigmatization and misunderstandings of ASD. There is also frustration that vocational rehabilitation programs often focus on changing the individuals with ASD to fit the workplace instead of promoting inclusion through acceptance and accommodations (Sarrett, 2017, as cited in Albright et al., 2020).

In a 2021 study by Anderson et al., young adults with ASD and their parents were interviewed on employment-related experiences, aspirational workplace goals, and obstacles faced. Regardless of their cognitive abilities, the employment outcomes for individuals with ASD in the United States are poor with many of them remaining

unemployed, underemployed, or unable to achieve their workplace potential (Anderson, Butt, & Sarsony, 2021).

In 2016, Ernst and Young established its Neurodiversity Centers of Excellence (NCoE) in several offices across the U.S. They found four main factors of how to best communicate with neurodiverse individuals in the workplace: communicate clearly using straightforward language, embrace honesty, pace the flow of information, and be mindful of sensitivities (Ernst & Young, 2016, as cited in Twaronite, 2020). While this advice is geared towards neurodiverse individuals, it is also more inclusive as there are people from diverse cultures and with different language barriers. Neurodiverse employees are more likely to take communication at face value and may misinterpret idiomatic language or sarcasm. Those on the autism spectrum may also come off as rude because of their use of frank and honest language. These comments sometimes stem from sensory processing issues and overload. It is also important to provide clear and logical information with pauses to allow for information processing. In addition to considerations for sights, sounds, and movements affecting neurodiverse individuals, it is also important to consider that changes in routine or even personnel can require extra time for neurodiverse individuals to adjust. As with the pandemic, an abrupt change to needing to work remotely could require additional time to adapt for neurodiverse individuals (Twaronite, 2020). Lexxic, established by Nicola James, is geared towards running workshops and interventions to help support neurodiverse individuals within companies to provide them with confidence building strategies to increase performance. Nicola James went through much of her life and education with undiagnosed dyslexia. In an interview, she described

how she believed her grades would be reflective of her efforts but noticed that while she did put in a lot of effort, the grades were not a reflection of this hard work. She felt inadequate when comparing herself to other students and believed this is due to the world catering to linear thinkers. Her company aims at connecting linear brains with more holistic minds to foster more innovation and creativity (James & Buggle, 2020). Being able to align a company or organization's needs with the accommodations essential to neurodiverse employees will foster a more inclusive environment as well as promote the innovation and creativity that neurodiverse employees bring to the workforce (Albright et al., 2020; James & Buggle, 2020; Twaronite, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic is at the core of emerging research across a variety of fields as it helps us navigate the understanding of what occurs before, during, and after a disaster. However, there is a need for more in-depth research regarding the effects of emergency transitions in the field of education for all educators. The majority of educator experiences across the globe highlighted similar challenges in the reliability of technology, access and communication with students and their families, and feelings of low self-efficacy (Eroğlu & Şenol, 2021; Güneş & Toran, 2021; Jayman & Lynam, 2024; Sari & Keser, 2021; Spain et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). However, further studies showed that there was a lack of preparation for transitioning to online teaching required during the pandemic and this reduced social or professional resources and support. This compiled with a lack of training and professional development increased stressed in education. In turn, this has affected the population of educators in their feelings of self-

efficacy, work performance, and burn out (An et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Nurse-Clarke & Sockol, 2022; Sari & Keser, 2021; Schultz & Love, 2022; Trust & Whalen, 2021; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023; Yang et al., 2021).

In previous studies, neurodiverse teachers were not specifically a focus of research. Most previous studies showed how neurodiverse professionals struggle with issues regarding executive functioning, social interactions, and sensory issues and benefit from additional support and resiliency training (Guy et al., 2020; Kornblau et al., 2019). Unexpected challenges can lead to further anxieties and barriers for neurodiverse individuals regarding work performance (Das et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2020; Kok et al., 2019; Kornblau et al., 2019). Additionally, studies included in the literature review discuss neurodiverse masking and camouflaging and workplace accommodation recommendations for neurodiverse individuals (Albright et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2021; Hull et al., 2021; James & Buggle, 2020; McQuaid et al., 2022; Twaronite, 2020).

Because studies on the experiences of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown an increase of stress due to the changing workplace and the effect on their self-efficacy beliefs, understanding the specific challenges of the neurodiverse educators will contribute to understanding the needs of this population. As there is a clear gap in the research on the experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored the experiences of neurodiverse educators during their transition from on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to help close the gaps in the literature. The study offered something new by directly exploring the experiences of neurodiverse educators

during this transition. A further understanding of these individuals experiences may contribute to the development of preparation techniques to increase resilience and rapid recovery in future catastrophic events (see Abramson et al., 2015).

In Chapter 3, I present the research methods design, rationale, and my role as the researcher in this study. Included is a discussion of participant selection, recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, instrumentation selection, research procedures, an explanation of the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how neurodiverse educators experienced transitions to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the workplace, neurodiverse individuals often reported difficulty with emotional and behavioral self-regulation due to frustrations and feelings of being overwhelmed. These feelings led to perceptions of being a failure and having lower self-esteem (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). The theoretical frameworks underlying this study highlight the role of self-efficacy and resiliency (Bandura, 2001; Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 2007).

In Chapter 3, I present the research methods design, rationale, and my role as the researcher. I discuss the selection of participants, procedures for recruitment, and data collection. Also included in this chapter is the selection of instrumentation and research procedures, an explanation of the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

For this study I used an IPA because this methodology allowed me to provide rich experiences and personal meanings of the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. IPA was developed by Smith et al. in the 1990s by drawing upon the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2022). The leading philosophical figures for phenomenological research are Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, who direct us to the importance of understanding that our perspectives and lived experiences are personal to

each of us as they relate to our relationships with others and the world (Smith et al., 2022).

Other qualitative approaches were considered. For example, ethnography focuses on identifying patterns of cultural groups and it would not be appropriate for this study. A case study approach would provide a detailed portrayal and analysis of a case or cases; it would not meet the requirements for this particular study to focus only on lived experiences. Below are the RQs for this study:

RQ1: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe the lived experience about the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt?

By highlighting specific issues faced by neurodiverse educators during the COVID-19 pandemic that are separate from other workplace events and transitions, this interpretative phenomenological study can aid in the future creation of career development tools, supports, and strategies that are inclusive to all educators. Findings from this study may help school administrators better understand this population of teachers and highlight the topics of building self-efficacy, resiliency, and adaptability in the field of education.

Language is the method in which understanding between two individuals can take place (Gadamer et al., 2004). To conduct an interpretative phenomenological qualitative study, the dominant theoretical framework for this study is Gadamer's philosophy on

interpreting lived experiences. During an interview, no one knows what will emerge in advance and with each conversation (i.e., interview) new information can present itself that can change the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon (Gadamer et al., 2004). Heidegger also believed that phenomenology could require examining something that was latent or disguised and would eventually emerge (Smith et al., 2022). This is part of the hermeneutic circle where revision will take place of my own fore-conception as a neurodiverse secondary educator. Thus, I believe this was the best method for this particular study.

Another major influence upon IPA is ideography. Which is concerned with the commitment to a particular focus and the detailed examination of the particular case using small and purposefully selected samples (Smith et al., 2022). In the context of neurodiverse secondary educators transitioning from on-ground to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, I feel that this means the requirement for specificity in an IPA.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I was an observer-participant and served as a human instrument. As a neurodiverse secondary educator, I had to transition online during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I believe that my experience as an online college instructor for 7 years prior to the pandemic made my perceptions and adaptability to the ERE experience different from many educators. I accept and understand this difference which allowed me to remain unbiased during the interview process. With that said, it is also because I am a neurodiverse secondary educator that I believe I can best interpret the lived experiences

of other neurodiverse educators and play an active role in the hermeneutic circle and revise my fore-conceptions (see Gadamer et al., 2004). My role as the researcher was to interview the participants in this study. However, it was still important to be aware of potential biases and employ strategies such as reflexivity by documenting my thoughts, interpretations, and beliefs through memos and journaling to mitigate any that arose.

To ensure that no ethical issue arose, participants were provided with the purpose of the study, and informed consent forms detailing any possible risks and consequences from participation. Participants were provided with their rights to withdraw, the confidentiality of the study, a review of all data collected, including their transcript and a summary of my interpretation. This was not only part of the informed consent process but also ensured accuracy and is a confirmation of the diverse perspectives and experiences (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The target population for this study was neurodiverse secondary educators who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Criterion sampling was used as these needed to be individuals who are both neurodiverse and secondary educators who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of criterion sampling is to represent people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An attempt was made to first recruit participants via social media groups on Facebook that are for neurodiverse professionals; however, there was a large volume of individuals who were phishing, and for the reliability of the participants, social media

recruitment was abandoned. Instead, participants were recruited via email as well as a request for snowball sampling where participants are asked to help identify and recruit other participants that meet the criteria (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants either self-identified or had a formal diagnosis for a neurodiverse condition. The participants answered open-ended questions through a semi-structured interview that produced data related to the lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic related to their roles as neurodiverse educators.

After eight participants were interviewed, saturation was reached. There was no longer a generation of new ideas or themes during data collection via interviews (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). After saturation was reached, I moved to further analysis.

Instrumentation

For this study, the data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interview questions are best suited for the methodology of IPA as it allowed for richer responses and interpretation using the hermeneutic circle as discussed in Smith et al. (2022). The interview questions focused on the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review informed the development of the problem statement and RQs, especially findings related to the experiences of educators transitioning to online education during the pandemic and the impact they perceived on their self-efficacy, adaptability, and resiliency as educators. Additionally, the challenges faced by neurodiverse individuals in the workplace impacted the lens through which this study was aimed. This ensured that the questions were

focused on exploring the experiences of neurodiverse educators during this transition, especially educators' perceptions and how this experience affected their adaptability, resiliency, and self-efficacy.

The theoretical framework of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Garnezy's (1993) theory on resiliency also informed the research design and further assisted in the coding, analysis, and interpretation of the interview responses. Social cognitive theory kept the focus on the role of self-belief, cognition, and the environment in shaping behavior with self-efficacy being a central concept (Bandura, 2001). Noting relationships and experiences during these interviews can give us a better understanding of what these neurodiverse educators experienced when transitioning from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Garnezy's theory of resiliency has also influenced the research design with a focus on perceptions of adaptability and resiliency through experiences in the interview questions. IPA requires a "healthy flexibility" in its development because it is focusing on the participants' attempts to make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Using semi-structured interview questions allowed for this flexibility and the interview questions were developed with this purpose in mind.

Content validity is the extent to which the measure used in the study accurately reflects the construct or concepts being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I completed a thorough review of the literature, theoretical frameworks, and the proper methodology of conducting an IPA study, as well as engaged with a qualitative expert to ensure content validity and review of the questions in my interview guide to accurately reflect the constructs of interest in this study. For sufficiency, or the extent to which the data

collected will be adequate to answer the RQs, I used a purposeful sampling method (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By providing detailed line-by-line analysis of the transcript for each participant, as well as copies of notes throughout the data collection process, I could request an independent audit to ensure validity as well as sufficiency (see Smith et al., 2022).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Once Walden's IRB approved the research study, I recruited eight participants who identified as neurodiverse secondary educators and taught during the COVID-19 pandemic via email and snowball sampling. Participants were directed to contact me by email if they were interested in participating. I then sent an email with a short demographic survey. It included gender, age, identify as neurodiverse, self-identified or form diagnosis, taught during March 2020 – March 2021 during the COVID-19 transition to online teaching, and taught sixth – 12th grade. I sent emails with invitations and the flyer to the potential participants containing details of the study. Once interest had been confirmed and participants had been selected, the Consent Form was sent. They were asked to reply "I consent" by email. Zoom was used to interview participants and appointments were set up to ensure time and privacy. An hour was allotted for each interview. The interviews were automatically recorded and transcribed via Zoom. The automatically transcribed interviews were reviewed for accuracy and appropriate edits were made if there were errors during the transcription process. There were no member-checking processes; however, I did ask if I could contact them for an additional Zoom session, or via email to clarify responses if necessary. Participants consented but

clarification was not necessary. All participants were assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be protected, and that personal information would not be shared without the participants' consent. Participants were able to end the interview at any time and exit the study, if they chose, since their participation was voluntary. While available, participants did not need to be provided with a mental health connection.

Data Analysis Plan

Social science studies have different options for qualitative research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was a basic qualitative design used to explore the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators. The use of an IPA methodology provided rich details and interpretation of these experiences using the hermeneutic circle. My experiences as a neurodiverse secondary educator afforded me the ability to best interpret and analyze these lived experiences (see Smith et al., 2022).

The interviews were coded to identify concepts and terms commonly expressed by the neurodiverse secondary teachers regarding their experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the guidelines for IPA data analysis by Smith et al. (2022), I began with a line-by-line analysis of each participant's experiential statements in the transcript looking for the claims, concerns, and understanding of each individual. The data analysis stage of an IPA require closely reading the transcript multiple times, taking detailed notes, and even listening to the audio multiple times. This allows for immersion in the data by the researcher and recalling the atmosphere of the interview. These efforts can provide new insight into the data and allowed for richer analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). I needed to have organized and detailed notes in each stage of my analysis

to allow future readers to follow through this process. This began with the detailed initial notes in the transcript, followed by the clustering of initial experiential statements into personal experiential themes (PETs), and into the development of group experiential themes (GETs) across the cases (see Smith et al., 2022). I used a table to list the open codes for each participant's exact words and phrases to identify key concepts. Then, thematic coding was used to identify these concepts and ideas as they emerged. It allowed for a comparison and to help find the point of saturation. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested using a visual model to compare codes for narrowing the data into fewer themes. I used Microsoft Excel to prepare a visual model to create codes according to the data's identified themes. Visual guides (figures, diagrams, or tables) were used for support and will be used within a full narrative that takes future readers through my analytical theme-by-theme interpretation with detailed commentary (see Smith et al., 2022). A reflection was included regarding my own perceptions, conceptions, and processes (see Smith et al., 2022).

During the data analysis process, I also took personal and reflective notes on how my personal characteristics like my gender, age, social status, etc. could have affected my rapport with each interviewee (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Gaining the participants' trust by building rapport is important to finding the answers to the RQs. Building rapport allows the participants to feel comfortable before and during the interview. This in turn allowed the participants to answer honestly and provide details that are essential to the study (see Smith et al., 2022).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are components of trustworthiness. To ensure the validity of the findings, participants were encouraged to engage throughout the interview process and confirm their responses.

Credibility

Addressing credibility helps validate whether the study is trustworthy by assessing the extent to which the findings of a study are reliable and accurate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thick descriptions and detailed responses were encouraged from the participants during the interview as well as during the interpretation process. The interviews continued until saturation was reached. Reflexivity is a strategy that aids in further establishing credibility and increased trustworthiness by being transparent about my own biases, experiences, assumptions, and interpretations and how they influence the research process and findings (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability is being able to transfer the results of the study to other settings. Using specific quotes and examples from the interview can help determine themes and patterns as they emerge. This can help with the generalizability of the findings to other populations, settings, or contexts. While this study is specific to neurodiverse educators, the goal is to provide rich and thorough details to allow the reader to determine the transferability. Thick descriptions allow the reader to have the opportunity to determine

external validity based on the array of research provided in the literature review giving an element of shared experiences through the discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability is how stable the results are over time. If a study can be repeated and the results are replicable, it is dependable. With careful consideration of how the participants answered the questions, assisted if there were interpretation concerns, and consistency, I aided in the dependability. Additionally, adjusting the questions according to the participants allowed me to confirm that their answers addressed the questions as they were intended. Lastly, I used an independent audit to review my work to confirm consistency. It is also important to provide negative or discrepant information since different perspectives can open the opportunity for discussion about themes. Presenting contradictory information can make the findings more realistic and more valid (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Confirmability

Reflexivity is a technique used to for confirmability by continually documenting and examining the biases of the researcher through their interpretations, assumptions, and experiences that can influence the findings of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Any potential influences were mentioned when the data was collected and interpreted. Interview guides and questions were reviewed by the URR.

Ethical Procedures

The guidelines and recommendations by Walden's IRB have been adhered to in this study. Walden University granted approval for this research under IRB approval

number 03-17-25-0999196. This includes but is not limited to the protection of potential participants' rights. A letter of consent was forwarded to Walden's IRB for approval along with the letter of invitation to be emailed to participants. After approval, an email invitation was sent to potential participants that met the inclusion criteria that detailed the purpose of the study's criteria, and a statement that their participation is voluntary, they could refuse to participate, and that they could opt-out at any time. The participants' information has been kept confidential and the potential risk for participating was minimal. The teachers' information is contained in a password-protected computer system to safeguard their confidential information. The interview information, recordings, transcriptions, and back-up information of the study are kept in a password-protected drive.

Ethical practices during the study were necessary to certify and alleviate any potential concerns. Adhering to the guidelines of the IRB increased my chances of completing the study while also decreasing the odds of any unethical practices. There are limitations to the study as I am a neurodiverse secondary educator that taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. While my perspective was essential to IPA methodology and the hermeneutic circle, I was careful not to impart some biases due inadvertently and unknowingly to my personal experiences (see Smith et al., 2022). The goal was to obtain honest responses from the participants in an objective manner and receive any new information presented that can change the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon (see Gadamer et al., 2004).

Summary

In this chapter, I described the methods I used in a qualitative study, including criteria for participation and snowball sampling for recruiting and selecting the participants. An outline of the IRB guidelines and criteria for possible participants were also discussed. An IPA approach was used in this study of neurodiverse secondary educators' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to explore the lived experiences of these educators. Data were analyzed using thematic coding following the guidelines for IPA data analysis proposed by Smith et al. (2022). Lastly, trustworthiness and ethical procedures were addressed according to the study's requirements. In Chapter 4, the study results are addressed, and the explanations of the findings are presented.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how neurodiverse secondary educators experienced the transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The RQs focused on the perceptions of these educators and how this lived experience affected their adaptability, resilience, and self-efficacy. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom with eight participants answering the RQs. This chapter includes the study setting, participant demographics, and the process used to collect and analyze the data. This chapter also includes evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

Setting

The goal of the study was to allow neurodiverse educators to describe their lived experiences during the pandemic, with particular attention to how neurodivergent traits shaped their responses to disruption and adaptation. The study was approved in March of 2025, during a transitional period for many schools as Spring Break and the academic year neared its end.

Recruitment coincided with the final weeks of the school year when educators are typically managing final lessons, grading, and attending administrative tasks. Initially, recruiting efforts were via Facebook groups for neurodiverse professionals, through word-of-mouth referrals, and direct email invitations. However, social media recruitment was discontinued due to a high volume of phishing attempts. This raised concerns about participant reliability and data integrity.

As a result, the focus for recruitment was using direct email invitations snowball sampling. The timing of this shift placed the recruitment at the last couple of weeks in the school year. As educators are receiving several emails during this time and preparing for transitioning to the summer, it is also likely this led to more modest response rates. Four additional educators expressed interest, but they did not meet the criteria for inclusion into the study.

Demographics

Inclusion criteria for participants required that they self-identified or had a formal diagnosis as neurodivergent and had taught sixth – 12th grades during the pandemic. Participants were excluded if they taught either elementary or in postsecondary educational settings, were not actively teaching during the pandemic, or had a prior mentoring relationship with the researcher. Table 1 shows participant demographics. The final sample included eight participants: seven women and one man, teaching across sixth through 12th grades. Participants represented a range of neurodivergent profiles, including ASD, ADHD, and dyslexia. Three out of the eight participants had received formal diagnoses for their conditions. The educators taught in diverse school settings with three different districts represented, seven public schools, and one charter school. The different districts and the charter school difference was not part of the demographic survey but were discovered during the interview process and I felt it was important to note.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant ID	Age range	Gender	Condition(s)	Diagnosis	Grade(s)
P 1	35-44	Female	ADHD/Dyslexia/A SD	Self-identified	6, 7, 8
P 2	45-54	Female	Dyslexia	Self-identified	10, 11, 12
P 3	25-34	Female	ADHD/Anxiety	Formal	6
P 4	45-54	Female	ADHD	Formal	7, 8
P 5	25-34	Female	ADHD	Self-identified	7
P 6	45-54	Female	ADHD	Self-identified	9, 10, 11, 12
P 7	35-44	Female	ADHD	Self-identified	9, 10
P 8	25-35	Male	ADHD	Formal	10, 11, 12

As shown in Table 1, participants represented a diverse range of neurodivergent profiles, including ADHD, dyslexia, ASD, and anxiety. All participants taught in secondary schools in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States of America and engaged in multiple instructional modalities during the pandemic, including video instruction, synchronous live sessions, hybrid teaching, and in-person support.

Data Collection

Initial recruitment efforts began with outreach via social media. Recruitment flyers were posted to neurodiverse professional groups on Facebook and were publicly available to view and share. These groups were selected for their relevance to the study's

target population of educators who identify as neurodivergent. However, due to the high number of phishing attempts and concerns about participant reliability, social media recruitment was discontinued. Instead, participants were recruited via direct email outreach and snowball sampling. In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), snowball sampling allowed initial participants to refer other educators who met the inclusion criteria.

Participants were eligible if they either self-identified or had a formal diagnosis of a neurodiverse condition (e.g., ADHD, ASD, dyslexia, etc.) and were actively teaching middle or high school (6-12th grade) during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions through a semi-structured interview designed to elicit rich descriptions of their lived experiences related to their self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability as neurodiverse educators transitioning from an on-ground to online platform for instruction.

Interested individuals contacted the researcher directly and received a demographic survey. If they met the criteria, they were emailed a consent form and scheduling options. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. The first two participants were interviewed before the school year ended. The remaining six participants were interviewed after the school year ended. Participants chose to have their video on and were interviewed from their homes. The researcher conducted interviews from a private home office to ensure privacy and consistency. Interviews were recorded via Zoom's built-in recording feature. The recruitment and data collection process spanned from the third week of March to the second week of July.

At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the study's purpose and asked for verbal consent to be recorded. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 59 minutes. A total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, consistent with the proposed sample range of six to 10 participants. Additional participants were not sought once saturation was reached, as recurring themes and constructs emerged across the interviews. As Creswell and Poth (2018) noted, saturation occurs when no new information is likely to emerge from further data collection.

Recordings were transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription feature. Each transcription was reviewed and edited for accuracy. All audio and transcription files were stored on my computer in a password-protected drive. Additionally, the files had names and personal identifiable information changed to "Interviewee [# of interview]" for further privacy.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study used an IPA to explore the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. IPA was selected for its emphasis on idiographic meaning-making and its use of the of the hermeneutic circle to interpret participant experiences (see Smith et al., 2022). As a neurodiverse secondary educator, I was uniquely positioned to engage in this interpretative process with empathy and insight.

After transcription, each interview was analyzed using a line-by-line approach to identify experiential statements, claims, concerns, and understandings expressed by the participants. Following Smith et al.'s (2022) IPA guidelines, I immersed myself in the

data by reading each transcript multiple times, listening to the recordings, and taking detailed notes. This process allowed me to recall each interview in detail, listening for tone, and deepening my interpretative engagement (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Initial notes were clustered into PETs, which capture the unique meaning and perspectives of each participant. These PETs were then synthesized across cases to develop GETs, representing shared patterns and the selected theoretical constructs of resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability. I used Microsoft Excel to organize codes, direct quotes, and thematic interpretations for each interviewee.

Microsoft Excel was used to visually model the coding process and track theme development. This strategy helped identify saturation points and allowed us to narrow data into fewer and more refined themes (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Visual aids like tables, diagrams, and thematic maps were used to support the narrative and guide readers through the analytical process. A reflective journal was maintained throughout to document my perceptions, conceptions, and interpretations as they evolved (see Smith et al., 2022).

During analysis, I also took personal and reflective notes on how my own characteristics, like gender, neurodivergence, and professional background, may have influenced rapport with my participants as well as my interpretation of their experiences. Building trust with participants was essential to eliciting honest, detailed responses, and ensuring the integrity of the data (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability need to be considered and met.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are accurate and grounded in the participant experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was established through thick description, detailed participant responses, and saturation of themes. Interviews continued until no new experiential patterns emerged. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study to acknowledge and mitigate personal biases, assumptions, and interpretations (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability was supported by providing rich, contextualized descriptions of participant experiences and settings, allowing readers to assess applicability to their contexts (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Direct quotes and detailed examples were used to illustrate themes and allow readers to assess the applicability to other populations or contexts. While the study focused on neurodiverse educators, the depth of the description enables readers to determine relevance to broader educational and professional settings.

Dependability

Dependability was ensured through consistent analytic procedures, detailed documentation, and an audit trail of coding decisions to support the stability of finding overtime (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview questions were adjusted responsibly to

clarify meaning and ensure alignment with research goals. Discrepant cases and contradictory data were included to enhance realism and validity.

Confirmability

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, transparent documentation of analytical decisions, and acknowledgment of researcher positionality, ensuring findings were grounded in participant data rather than researcher bias (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview guides and questions were reviewed by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Results

This section presents the findings of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight neurodivergent secondary educators who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using IPA, the results share the participants' lived experiences as they navigated the abrupt transition from on-ground to online teaching and hybrid instruction between March 2020 and March 2021.

Following IPA procedures outlined by Smith et al. (2022), the analysis produced six GETs and 11 PETs. GETs represent shared, higher-order experiential patterns across participants, while PETs reflect individualized variations nested within each GET (Smith et al., 2022).

These themes reflect emotional, cognitive, relational, and pedagogical dimensions of the transition, as well as the unique ways neurodivergent educators made sense of and adapted to the demands of pandemic teaching. Collectively, the six GETs and 11 PETs addressed the studies' RQs by illustrating how neurodiverse secondary school educators

describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (RQ1) and how they understood the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and adaptability (RQ2). Chapter 5 provides an interpretative discussion of these findings in relation to existing literature. The remainder of this chapter presents a cross-case thematic matrix, the GET-PET structure, followed by each GET with its corresponding PETs with supporting narrative and illustrative quotes.

Table 2 summarizes the presence of each PET across the eight interviews. This matrix illustrates which themes were universal and which emerged more selectively.

As indicated in Table 2, several themes were present across all eight interviews: emotional disruption, relational breakdown, pedagogical adaptation, tech tool mastery and fatigue, and reflective growth. Other themes, such as leadership impact, equity-driven access, and instructional compression, appeared more prominently with the educator participants with specific roles or teaching contexts.

Table 3 reorganizes the hierarchical structure of an IPA with the presence of each PET within the six GETs.

Table 3

Group Experiential Themes and Personal Experiential Themes

Group experiential themes (GET)	Personal experiential themes (PETs)
GET 1: Emotional disruption	PET 1.1: Emotional disruption PET 1.2: Relational breakdown
GET 2: Instructional disorientation	PET 2.1: Instructional disorientation PET 2.2: Instructional compression
GET 3: Technological strain and skill development	PET 3.1: Tech tool mastery and fatigue
GET 4: Systematic and leadership pressures	PET 4.1: Leadership impact PET 4.2: Systemic frustration PET 4.3: Equity-driven access
GET 5: Burnout and professional identity strain	PET 5.1: Burnout and disillusionment
GET 6: Adaptive pedagogical growth	PET 6.1: Pedagogical adaptation PET 6.2: Reflective growth

Table 3 reflects the hierarchical thematic structure consistent with IPA, in which the GETs represent shared, higher-order experiential patterns and PETs represent individualized, nuanced expressions of those patterns across participants.

GET 1: Emotional Disruption

This GET captures the emotional turbulence, instability, and relational strain that characterized participants' early and ongoing experiences during the transition to online and hybrid teaching during the pandemic. Across interviews, educators described heightened anxiety, cognitive overload, loss of routine, and erosion of relational cues that typically anchor their work as educators. Together PET 1.1 and PET 1.2 illustrate how emotional and relational disruptions shaped educators' lived experiences during the pandemic.

PET 1.1: Emotional Disruption

Emotional disruption emerged as a dominant theme across all eight interviews and was present in every account of each participant's transition from on-ground to online and hybrid teaching modalities. This theme aligns with RQ1, which explores how these neurodivergent secondary educators described their lived experiences during the pandemic. Across all eight interviews, participants described the early months of the pandemic as emotionally disorienting, frightening, and overwhelming. Participants consistently expressed feelings of fatigue, anxiety, cognitive overload, and emotional strain as they all navigated rapidly shifting instructional expectations as well as the broader uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewee 5 captured the collective anxiety by stating, "Everyone was worried about their own health... it created a little bit

of fear in everybody.” This emotional climate shaped the teachers’ ability to focus, plan, and engage with students and their workplace.

For many educators, the emotional disruption was tied to the loss of routine and structure. Several participants described this as essential to their functioning as neurodivergent individuals. Interviewee 7 explained, “Policy changes... communication changes... different ideas about what we were going to do... we were constantly having to change things.” This created an ongoing sense of instability for these educators, and the unpredictability heightened their stress, making it difficult to feel grounded in their work.

Participants also described cognitive overload, particularly during the early months of the transition. Interviewee 7 reflected on the mental exhaustion of trying to adapt instructional practices while simultaneously supporting colleagues and students: “I don’t think my mind ever got a chance to rest.” They elaborated that even after the school day ended, their thoughts continued racing: “Even when I went home at the end of the day, I was thinking about what I could do to make it better.” This persistent cognitive activity contributed to sleep disruption, with the participant noting, “It was hard to sleep, honestly.” Interviewee 1 also stated that “I did not go to bed earlier than 1 or 2 AM... constantly questioning what I was doing.”

For some educators, emotional disruption was intensified by feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Interviewee 3 expressed that this was "going from like a social setting and a routine... to complete isolation" and that the pandemic was “a very dark time for me” due to the mental strain and emotional disruption they experienced. Interviewee 3

added, “Personally, I hated it... I went through such a low,” while Interviewee 4 recalled that “it was daunting... overwhelming... not fun at all.” Interviewee 6 described feelings of being personally responsible for solving instructional and technological challenges without adequate guidance: “Everything was on me versus people coming up with solutions to try to help me or help the students.” This sense of isolation and responsibility contributed to emotional fatigue and, for some, burnout.

Participants also expressed empathy-driven emotional strain, particularly related to concerns about student well-being. Interviewee 8 stated it was “quiet. There’s like not a lot of noise going on in the class itself... most were too shy to unmute.” The absence of relational cues made it difficult for teachers to assess whether students were struggling academically or emotionally, which heightened their sense of responsibility and worry as Interviewee 1 expressed, “Our job is to educate... but also help them develop as a person.” These reflections demonstrate how emotional disruption shaped their teaching experience during the pandemic.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and a strong ethic of care. The educators began confronting the instructional confusion once the emotional shock of the changes began to settle into their daily lives. In the end, emotional disruption did not lead to disengagement; rather, it often motivated educators to work harder, adapt more creatively, and seek ways to support students despite these constraints.

PET 1.2: Relational Breakdown

The theme of relational breakdown addresses RQ1 by describing the loss of relational connections with students and colleagues during online and hybrid instruction.

Participants consistently described the disappearance of face-to-face interaction as one of the most painful aspects of pandemic teaching. Interviewee 5 shared, “Getting kids to put their cameras on was practically impossible... I didn’t know who most of the kids were.” Many educators worried about the students’ disengagement, mental health, and access to resources. Interviewee 2 stated, “We weren't allowed to see faces... we got to see their Skittles or M&M dots,” which described the emotional weight of teaching to silent screens since students were not required to have their cameras or microphones on.

The educators described the relational void as deeply unsettling. Interviewee 3 reflected that “it was really hard not being able to create relationships with the kids,” while Interviewee 7 noted that even in breakout rooms, designed for student interactions, “there would be nothing, no responses at all.” These experiences demonstrate how the absence of relational feedback undermined teachers’ sense of connection, purpose, and instructional impact. As the relational strain deepened, many educators began experiencing emotional exhaustion and questioning their profession.

GET 1 illustrates how emotional turbulence and relational disconnection formed the backdrop of educators’ early pandemic experiences. PET 1.1 highlighted the internal emotional strain of anxiety, cognitive overload, and loss of routine, while PET 1.2 demonstrated how the erosion of relational cues compounded this strain. Together the PETs show that emotional and relational disruption were not separate phenomena, but deeply intertwined aspects of the educators lived experience during the transition to online and hybrid teaching.

GET 2: Instructional Disorientation

This GET captures the cognitive, structural, and pedagogical confusion educators experienced as they attempted to translate established instructional routines into unfamiliar digital and hybrid environments. Participants described uncertainty about platforms, pacing, assessment, and engagement. This was compounded by the abrupt shift in expectations and limited preparation. PET 2.1 and PET 2.2 together illustrate how instructional instability and compressed schedules disrupted educator's sense of control, clarity, and instructional identity.

PET 2.1: Instructional Disorientation

Instructional disorientation was a dominant theme across all eight interviews and further addressed RQ1, exploring how neurodivergent educators experienced the transition to online and hybrid teaching. Participants described a profound sense of disorientation as they attempted to translate familiar instructional routines to unfamiliar digital environments. This included uncertainty about platforms, pacing, assessment practices, and engagement strategies, which were due to the abrupt instructional shift, unclear expectations, and unfamiliar digital platforms.

The participants consistently described the transition to online teaching as disorganized, unstructured, and chaotic. Interviewee 4 described the early confusion: "We were told that we're only going to be out for 2 weeks... then another 2... scrambling to figure out how to put stuff online." Interviewee 1 described the abruptness of the shift: "We didn't really have access to Zoom... never taught online before." The lack of preparation and training led to feelings of inadequacy and confusion, particularly around

how to maintain instructional integrity within a virtual space. This was further compounded by engagement anxiety, as teachers struggled to connect with students who were physically distant and often distracted. Interviewee 1 recalled, "I had a kid Zooming from a pool... how is he getting any information?" This one a highlight of the breakdown of traditional classroom expectations and norms.

Educators describe the cognitive overload of learning new systems while teaching full-time. Interviewee 2 explained, "It's basically trial by fire... trying to convert that to showing it to the class while I'm talking," while Interviewee 6 described the challenge of converting to hands-on learning, "trying to teach a tech ed class online... not the same cooperation." Several other educators echoed the collapse of hands-on learning, especially in subjects that relied on tactile or lab-based instruction. Interviewee 4 stated that "we couldn't do hands-on thing... everything was demos... no kits for students." While Interviewee 2 reflected, "I questioned everything I was doing" and this highlighted the emotional toll of trying to adapt lessons without the usual feedback loop or traditional instructional scaffolding.

Disorientation also stemmed from the loss of flexibility and spontaneity. Interviewee 1 noted, "I'm a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kind of person... couldn't do that anymore," describing how rigid planning structures and fixed student groups as seen during hybrid, disrupted their preferred teaching style. The shift from dynamic, responsive instruction, to static and pre-scripted lessons was experienced both as limiting in terms of pedagogy as well as emotionally draining.

Logistical constraints further contributed to disorientation as Interviewee 1 shared, “I had to rotate classrooms... couldn’t use my science equipment.” These physical limitations and that of equipment disrupted instructional flow. These spatial challenges were compounded by technological gaps, with teachers often serving and informal tech mentors. As Interviewee 1 explained, “I had to help a lot of people set up their document camera,” even while managing their own instructional transitions.

Overall, instructional disorientation was characterized by a loss of control, clarity, and confidence. Neurodiverse educators, who often rely on structure and predictability, found themselves navigating a landscape of constant change, limited feedback, and unfamiliar tools. Despite these challenges, many demonstrated adaptability and resilience, which will be explored in subsequent themes.

PET 2.2: Instructional Compression

This aligns with RQ1 by describing how reduced class time, altered schedules, and shortened instructional blocks forced teachers to condense curriculum and adjust their pacing.

Participants described the reduced instructional time, which required them to prioritize essential content and streamline lessons. There was pressure to maintain academic rigor because, as stated by Interviewee 4, “The district gave us priority standards” in a setting that, as Interviewee 8 described as having to “teach what would’ve taken me 2 days in the span of one day online.” Interviewee 4 noted, “We had 2 or 3 classes a day... only 30 minutes with each class.”

There was also a cognitive strain to condensing instruction while maintaining the academic standards. Interviewee 2 reflected on the challenge of balancing pacing with student comprehension: “I couldn’t authentically check them.”

GET 2 illustrates the instructional instability that defined educators’ early pandemic experiences. PET 2.1 captured the confusion and cognitive overload associated with navigating unfamiliar platforms, shifting expectations, and disrupted instructional routines. PET 2.2 demonstrates how compressed schedules and reduced instructional time further strained educators’ ability to maintain rigor and support student learning. Together, these PETs show how instructional disorientation undermined educators’ sense of self-efficacy while also prompting creative adaptation.

GET 3: Technological Strain and Skill Development

The GET illustrates the dual experience of technological growth and technological exhaustion that characterizes the transition of on-ground to online and hybrid teaching by educators. Participants described rapid skill acquisition, increased digital confidence, and creative problem-solving, while also navigating platform failures, device limitations, and constant troubleshooting. PET 3.1 demonstrates how technological mastery and technological fatigue coexisted as educators adapted to these unprecedented digital demands.

PET 3.1: Tech Tool Mastery and Fatigue

This theme addresses RQ1 by highlighting both the educators’ growth in technology skills and the exhaustion caused by the constant troubleshooting, platform

changes, and digital overload. Participants described feelings of empowerment and fatigue as they navigated new digital tools.

Interviewee 8 shared points of increased efficiency with, “grading had significantly decreased... everything was already pre-integrated.” While Interviewee 5 added that they learned new skills like, “learn how to do a bit of coding in Google Sheets.” These experiences reflected rapid skill acquisition under pressure.

At the same time, this pressure created exhaustion from constant troubleshooting and platform instability. Interviewee 7 recalled, “It just didn’t work... I didn’t know how to use the assessment tool myself.” Interviewee 6 described the strain of a ransomware attack they had experienced: “We were closed for at least, I’m pretty sure it was, 6 weeks... had to get new computers.” This dual experience of mastery and fatigue shaped teachers’ instructional confidence and emotional well-being. As teachers navigated technological demands, the relational consequences of online teaching became increasingly apparent.

GET 3 demonstrates how technology became both a catalyst for instructional innovation and a source of significant strain. PET 3.1 shows that while educators rapidly developed new digital competencies, these gains were accompanied by fatigue, frustration, and emotional depletion due to time constraints and pressures to maintain academic standards. The coexistence of mastery and exhaustion reflects the complex technological landscape that educators were required to navigate during the pandemic.

GET 4: Systemic and Leadership Pressures

This GET captures the institutional, structural, and policy-drive forces that shaped educators' experiences during the pandemic. Participants described inconsistent directives, shifting expectations, inequitable systems, and leadership decisions that either stabilized or destabilized their work and experiences. PET 4.1, PET 4.2, and PET 4.3 together show how leadership communication, systemic barriers, and equity concerns intersected to influence the educators' sense of support, agency, and professional well-being.

PET 4.1: Leadership Impact

Leadership impact addresses RQ1 by demonstrating how leadership decisions, communication patterns, and administrative support shaped educators' experiences during the pandemic. Educators described leadership as either a stabilizing force or a source of additional stress. Interviewee 4 offered a clear contrast between the two principals that transitioned at the school during the pandemic: "Our principal now... prepares for everything... very transparent," compared to the earlier experiences where Interviewee 6 explained, "It was chaos...we didn't feel like administration was helping, and I mean there was no support from our department." They continued to describe experiences where communication was inconsistent and reactive. This shift in leadership style significantly influenced the teachers' sense of stability and emotional well-being.

Several educators described feeling unsupported during the early months of the pandemic. Interviewee 3 recalled, "It was very isolating... not a lot of support," which further highlights how a lack of clear direction left teachers feeling abandoned.

Interviewee 6 echoed this sentiment by describing “that felt like I wasn't supported by admin or any of the higher ups... that was so hard to deal with...everybody wanted to blame me and so it was just very few people who were trying to support me.” Interviewee 6 further described this experience left them feeling “horrible. I felt unappreciated, unwanted, which prompted me to looking for new jobs.” These accounts reflect how leadership decisions directly affect teachers’ confidence and morale.

Leadership also shaped instructional expectations. Interviewee 4 described that the district mandated “priority standards,” explaining, “we had to focus on what was essential,” which required teachers to rapidly redesign curriculum. Interviewee 5 noted the challenges of accountability by no knowing, “what’s going on behind the screen?... Accountability became a really big thing.” These reflections illustrate how administrative directives influenced daily instructional decisions.

Some of the educators describe positive leadership moments that supported adaptation. Interviewee 7 shared how their school proposed a hybrid access model: “We suggested it to our superintendent... then other schools started doing it.” This is an example how collaborative leadership empowered teachers to develop solutions to better support students. As the teachers navigated leadership decisions and systematic expectations, many also encountered broader institutional barriers and frustrations.

PET 4.2: Systemic Frustration

This theme addresses RQ1 by illustrating the frustration of inconsistent policies, shifting directives, and systemic barriers that complicated the educators’ work. Participants described feeling constrained by district-level decisions that changed

frequently and lacked clarity. Interviewee 7 recalled, “One day we might hear... next day we were told you can’t,” showing the instability of shifting guidelines. Interviewee 4 critiqued PBIS implementation, “Positive behavioral Interventions and Supports... it’s supposed to promote positive behavior ...You can ask most teachers. They hate it.” This reflects frustration with policies that felt disconnected from classroom realities.

Systemic inequities also contributed to frustration. Interviewee 4 described inconsistent consequences for student behaviors like a student that, “threw a chair... came back with candy... a huge lack of accountability.” These examples demonstrated how systemic structures sometimes undermine teachers’ efforts to maintain consistency and fairness. As systemic pressures mounted, educators became increasingly aware of the inequities affecting student access and participation.

PET 4.3: Equity-Driven Access

This theme addresses RQ1 by describing how educators worked to support multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and others that lacked reliable technology or home support. Participants described significant challenges in ensuring equitable access to instruction. Interviewee 6 explained the difficulty of supporting multilingual learners online, “working with my multilingual students...making sure they were understanding,” noting that the loss of one-on-one scaffolding limited comprehension. Interviewee 7 described the voluntary in-person sessions for students with accommodations that was approved as a pilot in their school since “students who had accommodations weren’t getting the support.” These examples show how online formats disproportionately affected vulnerable students.

Technology access was another major barrier. Interviewee 6 noted, “You can’t control is they’re watching 3 or 4 siblings... or don’t have internet.” While Interviewee 5 described connection issues with “kids had connection issues... you don’t know exactly what they are doing on the other side of the screen.” These challenges complicated engagement, assessment, and communication.

However, educators also described their proactive efforts to bridge access gaps. Interviewee 7 stated that their school advocated for hybrid access early on: “We suggested it to our superintendent... then other schools started doing it.” This reflects how teachers sought structural solutions to support students who were falling behind.

Equity-driven access also involves emotional labor. Interviewee 1 described students crying during online sessions, explaining they were overwhelmed: "A couple of the girls were crying... '[Int 1], haven't seen you in so long!'" Teachers often become emotional anchors for students navigating fear, confusion, and isolation. As teachers worked to ensure equitable access, they also developed new instructional strategies and adaptive practices.

GET 4 illustrates how institutional structures, leadership decisions, and systemic inequalities shaped educators’ pandemic experiences. PET 4.1 shows the stabilizing or destabilizing role of leadership communication and support. PET 4.2 captured the frustration generated by inconsistent policies and other systemic barriers. PET 4.3 demonstrated that inequalities in access and support disproportionately affected vulnerable students and required educators to engage in additional emotional and instructional labor. These PETs show how systemic and leadership pressure profoundly

influenced educators' sense of agency, stability, professional self-efficacy and well-being.

GET 5: Burnout and Professional Identity Strain

This GET illustrates the emotional depletion, professional discouragement, and identity strain that the educators experienced as the pandemic continued. While earlier GETs reflect emotional disruptions, instructional instability, and systemic pressures, GET 5 highlights the cumulative impact of these stressors. PET 5.1 demonstrates how prolonged crisis teaching led some educators to question their professional future, sense of self-efficacy, and place within the educational system.

PET 5.1: Burnout and Disillusionment

This theme addresses RQ1 by capturing emotional exhaustion, frustration, and professional disillusionment educators experiences during this prolonged period of crisis teaching. Participants described feeling depleted, unsupported, and overwhelmed. Interviewee 3 shared, "I feel like I came, I did what I could, and I'm good to leave," reflecting a sense of professional exhaustion. Interviewee 4 had similarly noted, "I was ready to quit... had we not gotten a new principal, I would have transferred." This account illustrates how sustained stress, lack of administrative support, and isolation contributed to burnout.

Teachers also described feeling disillusioned by systemic failures. Interviewee 6 recalled, "Everybody was beating me up...wanting me to fail," showing how criticism and a lack of support eroded morale. The theme of burnout and disillusionment captures the emotional toll of prolonged crisis teaching and the ways in which educators question

their role, impact, and the future of the profession. As burnout intensified, educators increasingly turned their attention to systemic and leadership factors in shaping their lived experience.

GET 6: Adaptive Pedagogical Growth

This final GET captures the creative, reflective, and adaptive growth the educators developed in response to the challenges of pandemic teaching. While the earlier GETs highlighted the disruption and strain, GET 6 shows how educators transformed their instructional practices, embraced new tools, and redefined their professional identities. PET 6.1 and PET 6.2 together demonstrate how adaptation and reflection became sources of resilience, innovation, and long-term pedagogical growth and development.

PET 6.1: Pedagogical Adaptation

This theme addresses RQ1 by illustrating how educators reconfigured instruction through creativity, experimentation, and flexible problem solving.

Participants described adopting new technologies, redesigning lessons, and experimenting with alternative instructional formats. Interviewee 4 explained, “I created a lot of videos... got a tablet to write on... trying to teach Punnett squares,” demonstrating how teachers used digital tools to replicate modeling and guided practice. Interviewee 8 described building a full asynchronous system: “I spent about 2 to 3 hours filming videos for my students and sending them out.”

Educators also sought to preserve hands-on learning despite remote constraints. Interviewee 2 encouraged students to use household items. “Go get this in your house...

what are the physical properties of it?” Interviewee 6 asked students, “Do you have materials at home to build a bridge?” These strategies reflect attempts to maintain tactile learning and pedagogical integrity.

Hybrid instruction added another layer of complexity. Interviewee 7 described maintaining dual access: “They were able to access me either way,” while Interviewee 8 navigated rotating cohorts by describing, “Monday I would see cohort A in person... cohort B online... then they switch.” These accounts illustrate the cognitive and logistical demands of planning for multiple modalities simultaneously.

Pedagogical adaptation also involved emotional resilience. Interviewee 3 described learning to accept imperfection. “It’s okay if things fail... reflect and change it or move on.” This mindset allowed teachers to adapt without becoming overwhelmed by constant change. As educators adapted their instructional practices, many also engaged in deeper reflection about their professional identity and growth.

PET 6.2: Reflective Growth

This theme addresses RQ2 by capturing how educators made meaning of their experiences, reassessed their professional identities, and integrated new insights into their ongoing practice.

Participants described becoming more intentional and reflective as a result of the pandemic. Interviewee 4 emphasized, “Once we stop being reflective... we’re doing our kids a disservice.” This highlights the importance of ongoing self-evaluation. As previously stated, Interviewee 3 described learning to accept imperfection and use it as a point of growth.

Reflective growth also involved rethinking instructional identity. Interviewee 7 shared, “It affirmed my self-efficacy... pushed my belief in what I could do beyond just my subject matter,” while Interviewee 8 described adopting a pragmatic mindset by stating that “whatever I sent out... it had to be what it was.” These accounts show how educators developed greater confidence, flexibility, and self-compassion.

Participants also described long term instructional evolution. Interviewee 1 shared, “I still use Google Classroom... I wouldn’t have used that before COVID,” while Interviewee 3 noted, “Still, today I use all those things that I had to learn during COVID.” These reflections highlight how digital tools and adaptive strategies became permanent components of their teaching.

GET 6 illustrates how educators transformed disruption into growth. PET 6.1 highlights creative instructional adaptation, while PET 6.2 shows how reflection deepened professional identity and long-term pedagogical evolution. Together these PETs show that in the face of profound challenges, educators were able to develop new competencies, confidence, and instructional philosophies that extended beyond the pandemic context. Reflective growth captures the transformative learning that occurred as educators navigated crisis teaching and redefined their professional identities. This final theme concludes the presentation of findings and sets the stage for Chapter 4’s summary and the interpretive analysis in Chapter 5.

Summary

Across the six GETs and 11 PETs, this chapter presented the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators as they navigated the transition from on-ground to

online and hybrid teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed a trajectory from emotional and instructional disruption toward reflection, adaptation, and professional growth. In Chapter 5, these findings will be interpreted in relation to existing literature on educator resilience, adaptability, and professional identity during crisis contexts and through the study's theoretical frameworks: Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, with the focus on self-efficacy, and Garmezy's (1993) resilience theory. This interpretation will connect participant's lived experiences to the theoretical constructs, address the study's limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter presents the interpretation, limitations, recommendations, and implications that emerged from this IPA of the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators as they transitioned from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to explore how neurodivergent educators made sense of this abrupt transitional shift and how their experiences reflected their self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory and Garmezy's (1993) resilience theory, this study examined how emotional, cognitive, relational, and structural factors shaped participants' experiences and adaptive responses.

Semi-structured interviews of eight neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were conducted to gather data to answer the RQs. The educators taught in a Mid-Atlantic state of the United States and worked in public and public charter schools across three counties. IPA was selected because it allows for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of how individuals interpret significant life events (see Smith et al., 2022). Consistent with IPA's commitment to this depth, meaning-making, and double hermeneutic, this study focused on participants' subjective interpretations while also acknowledging my interpretative role in making sense of their accounts. The analytic process followed the recommended IPA steps of close reading, exploratory noting, development of emergent themes, and an integration of patterns across cases (see Smith et al., 2022).

The findings in Chapter 4 were organized into six GETs and the 11 total PETs grouped within their respective GETs. These GETs, each supported by PETs, reflected both vulnerability factors and protective supports. This illustrates how neurodiverse educators navigated uncertainty with resilience while also developing new competencies, engaging in meaning-making and adaptability, throughout the pandemic in relation to their professional identity and self-efficacy. This chapter interprets those findings through the study's theoretical frameworks, outlines the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and implications for practice and social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

This interprets the findings by comparing them to those of the current literature in Chapter 2. They are also interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory with a focus on self-efficacy, as well as Garmezy's (1993) resilience theory. The GETs in the findings were (a) emotional disruption, (b) instructional disorientation, (c) technological strain and skill development, (d) systemic and leadership pressures, (e) burnout and professional identity strain, and (f) adaptive pedagogical growth. The RQs that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe the lived experience of the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt?

Consistent with IPA, the goal of this section is not to generalize but to offer a nuanced, idiographic account of how neurodiverse educators made sense of their experiences (see Smith et al., 2022). IPA uses the double hermeneutic where participants interpret their lived experiences and then the researcher interprets those interpretations. The six GETs identified reflect this layered meaning-making and are the foundation for the following theoretical interpretations.

Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory emphasizes the reciprocal interaction of personal factors, behavior, and the environment. This is central to an individual's beliefs in their abilities to accomplish tasks and execute actions to manage different situations and contexts, in other words, their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can also vary greatly by context within the same individual and can fluctuate as it is a dynamic concept and not a global trait (Bandura, 2001). Bandura identified four primary sources of self-efficacy, emotional and physiological states, mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion, which together shape how individuals interpret challenges and sustain effort in the face of adversity.

The findings of this study illustrate how neurodivergent educators' self-efficacy was shaped by emotional states, mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and verbal persuasion, which are Bandura's four primary sources of efficacy. The GET of emotional disruption reflects how emotional arousal influences self-efficacy beliefs within Bandura's theory. Participants described feelings of anxiety, sensory overload, and cognitive fatigue. Often expressing frustration, exhaustion, confusion, uncertainty, and feelings of generally being overwhelmed during the abrupt transition of on-ground to

online and hybrid teaching. These emotional and physiological reactions undermined their initial sense of capability, aligning with research showing that stress and uncertainty reduced self-efficacy during crisis (see An et al., 2021; Baker et al., 2021; Cardullo et al., 2021).

For neurodiverse educators, these emotional and physiological effects were intensified by sensory sensitivities, executive functioning demands, and difficulties with rapid transitions as documented in the literature (Das et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021). The interaction between environmental stressors and neurodivergent processing contributed to increased vulnerability during the early stages of the pandemic.

As participants developed new instructional strategies, created digital content, and adapted their lessons to an online format, they gained mastery experiences that strengthened self-efficacy. These experiences were reflected in the GET of adaptive pedagogical growth and were a significant contribution to the educators' adaptability, which is a core component in their evolving self-efficacy. Bandura (2001) identified mastery experiences as the most powerful source of self-efficacy, and the participants' narratives demonstrated how successful adaptation gradually replaced their initial uncertainty with more confidence. Bandura's emphasis on agency, forethought, and intentional action was reflected in the participants by restructuring their routines, seeking resources, and developing new instructional approaches. This shows how educators used reflection to reinterpret their experiences, adapt, recognize their progress, and rebuild their sense of self-efficacy as educators.

The GETs of emotional disruption and systemic and leadership pressures demonstrate how the absence or presence of relational support shaped participants' self-efficacy. When administrators communicated clearly and colleagues shared resources, participants experienced vicarious learning and verbal persuasion as two additional sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Conversely, when there was inconsistent communication, a lack of modeling, and limited opportunities for collaboration, the educators felt isolated and their self-efficacy was negatively affected. These findings align with research showing that connectedness to colleagues and administrators enhances educator self-efficacy during crises (Yang et al., 2021).

Garmezy's (1993) resilience theory focuses on the interaction of vulnerability factors, protective factors, and adaptive outcomes. Resilience, within this framework, is not fixed but also a dynamic process that emerges when personal strengths interact with supportive environments to buffer the effects of stress and promote positive adaptive functioning. The findings of this study align closely with this framework by demonstrating how neurodiverse educators navigated adversity through a combination of personal strengths, relational supports, and environmental resources. The resilience demonstrated by participants in this study reflects broader patterns observed across school-based helping professions during the COVID-19 pandemic, where professionals reported navigating emotional strain while simultaneously developing effective coping strategies (Hale et al., 2023).

When participants described sensory overload, executive functioning strain, ambiguous communication, and a loss of relational connectedness with students and

colleagues it increased vulnerability and made adaptation more challenging. These findings mirror the assertion that vulnerability arises where individuals face high demands with insufficient support (Garmezy, 1993). For neurodiverse educators, vulnerability was intensified by cognitive and sensory processing differences documented in the literature, including difficulties with rapid transitions, planning, and managing competing demands (Das et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2021).

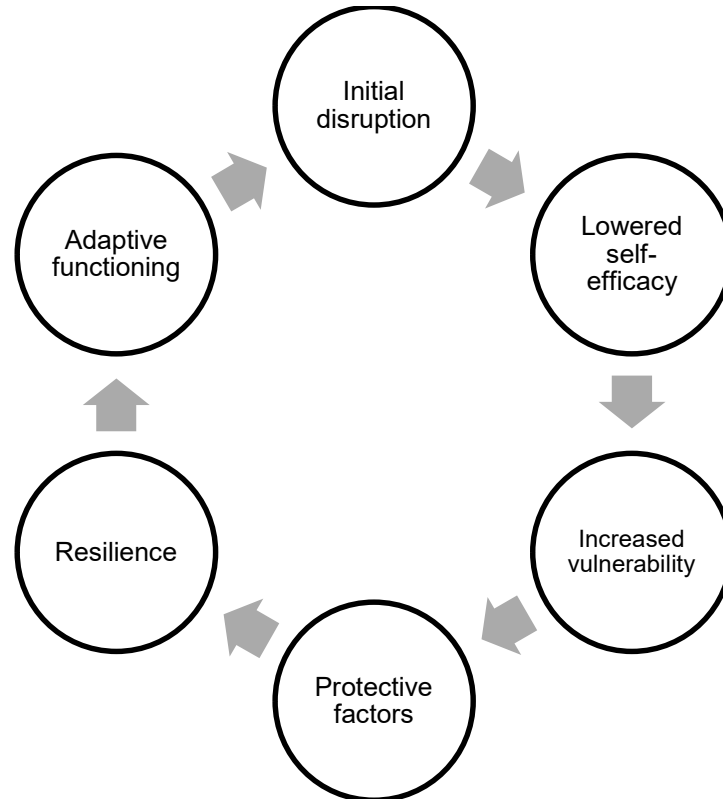
Protective factors did emerge across multiple GETs with supportive leadership, access to technology, flexible instructional policies, and personal strengths like creativity and hyperfocus acting as buffers to stress. These findings align with the resilience activation framework that resilience is activated when individuals have access to social and structural resources (Abramson et al., 2015). Participants developed new technological skills, redesigned curriculum, restructured routines, and gained deeper self-knowledge through reflection. These outcomes reflect Garmezy's conceptualization of resilience as long-term adaptation rather than simply temporary coping.

Interpreting these findings through both Bandura and Garmezy reveals a dynamic interplay between self-efficacy. For example, positive functioning and adaptability can emerge despite adversity which is demonstrated in both Garmezy's (1993) and Bandura's (2001) theories. The six GETs show how these constructs of resilience, adaptability, and self-efficacy interacted throughout the participants' accounts of their lived experiences. Consistent with Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy, these interpretations reflect the interplay between the participants' meaning-making and the researcher's interpretive engagement, which is core to an IPA study (Smith et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy was a foundation for resilience. The early pandemic drove low self-efficacy through emotional disruption, instructional disorientation, relational breakdown, and technological overload. This heightened vulnerability and made adaptation more difficult. However, as participants gained mastery of their experiences and received relational support, their self-efficacy increased. This allowed them to reframe their challenges into something more manageable, enabling them to adapt. This shift supports their resilience by fostering agency, persistence, and problem-solving.

Resilience also strengthens and rebuilds self-efficacy. Protective factors like supportive leadership, peer collaboration, and personal strengths were instrumental in helping these educators rebuild their confidence. Participants were then able to adapt their instruction, create digital content, and engage in reflective meaning-making and growth. These accumulated successful experiences in adapting to their new instructional world reinforced their self-efficacy as educators.

Both Bandura (2001) and Garmezy (1993) also emphasized the important role of environmental context. The COVID-19 pandemic undermined self-efficacy and increased vulnerability due to conditions of uncertainty, rapid change, and inequity. However, as educators were able to access support from administration and colleagues, practical resources, and coping strategies, it activated resilience, facilitated adaptation to rebuilt self-efficacy, and strengthened resilience. This reciprocal, mutually reinforcing interaction between self-efficacy and resilience is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Cycle of Self-Efficacy and Resilience Interactions*

Note. Arrows indicate directional influence and feedback loops. Labels correspond to initial disruption (abrupt shift to online teaching); lowered self-efficacy (reduced confidence in teaching tasks); increased vulnerability (heightened stress and uncertainty); protective factors (social support, practical resources, and coping strategies); adaptive functioning (restored daily or role-based performance like lesson delivery, classroom management, and routines). The return arrow from adaptive functioning to initial disruption indicates that successful adaptation restores self-efficacy and strengthens resilience, which alters how subsequent disruptions are experienced.

The cycle begins with an initial disruption that undermined educators' confidence, producing lowered self-efficacy and increased vulnerability. Protective factors like collegial support, administrative responsiveness, and practical resources, engaged and activated resilience processes. Resilience supported adaptive functioning as educators developed new routines, adjusted pedagogy, and gained technological competence. Those adaptive successes produced mastery experiences and reduced stress, which restored self-efficacy. Restored self-efficacy then reinforced resilience, creating a feedback loop that sustained further adaptation and recovery.

This cycle reflects that resilience is not a momentary response to crisis, but an evolving pattern of adaptation seen over time, which is consistent with Garmezy's conceptualization of resilience as a long-term positive function and not just temporary coping (Garmezy, 1993). Additionally, this model highlights that cognitive beliefs, like self-efficacy, and environmental and contextual supports, like protective factors, operate together and strengthening one element amplifies the other and produce a more durable adaptive outcome. Rather than acting independently, self-efficacy and resilience worked together to shape how educators interpreted challenges, engaged in problem-solving, and sustained effort over the course of pandemic teaching.

Lastly, the GETs show the unique contributions of neurodivergent educators, including creativity, deep focus, innovative problem-solving, and reflective insight, as seen in the current workplace literature (Albright et al., 2020; James & Bugge, 2020; Twaronite, 2020). The participants' adaptive responses drew from these strengths, enabling them to redesign instruction, experiment with new approaches to pedagogy, and

engage in reflective growth and meaning-making despite the stressors they encountered. These strengths enrich their adaptive responses and demonstrate the importance of understanding neurodivergent educators within their cognitive and sensory contexts and recognizing the assets they bring to the profession when appropriate supports are in place.

While many of the challenges described by the participants mirror those reported in global educator research during the COVID-19 pandemic (An et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Jayman & Lynam, 2024), this study extends the literature by showing how neurodivergent traits shaped the experiences of the participants. Participants described heightened sensory and cognitive load, increased difficulty with transitions, reliance on structure and predictability, challenges with ambiguous communication, and the emotional labor associated with masking and camouflaging behaviors. In the GET of adaptive pedagogical growth, participants also demonstrated strengths like creativity, deep focus, innovation, and reflective insight, all of which contributed to how they adapted to instructional disruption and uncertainty.

These neurodivergent-specific factors influenced both self-efficacy and resilience and led to their adaptive outcomes like pedagogical innovation, technological skill development, and reflective growth. Rather than representing deficits, neurodivergent traits were able to function as sources of adaptability and insight when environmental conditions like support allowed those strengths to be expressed. This integrated interpretation of Bandura's social cognitive theory and Garmezy's resilience theory reveals the complex and dynamic process in how self-efficacy and resilience interact to shape neurodiverse educators' experiences during the pandemic. Adaptation is, therefore,

not solely an individual experience but one that emerged through the interaction of personal strengths, cognitive beliefs, relational support, and structural conditions.

While this study offers a nuanced, theory-informed interpretation of the experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators transitioning from on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge the methodological and contextual boundaries within these findings. Consistent with IPA, the emphasis on depth, meaning-making, and idiographic understanding necessarily shapes the scope and transferability of the results (Smith et al., 2022). The following section outlines key limitations related to research design, participant characteristics, and contextual factors that may influence how these findings are interpreted and applied beyond this study.

Limitations of the Study

All research studies contain limitations that shape the interpretation and transferability of their findings. In an IPA, such limitations are understood within the methodology's commitment to depth, ideography, and interpretive meaning-making (Smith et al., 2022). This study reflects these boundaries, as well as contextual factors that influenced the trustworthiness of the findings.

To begin, this study relied on a small sample of eight neurodiverse secondary educators, which remains consistent with IPA's emphasis on detailed exploration rather than representativeness. Although this sample size aligns with these methodological expectations, it naturally limits the range of perspectives captured. The experiences of these eight neurodivergent individuals may differ from those of neurodivergent educators working in different grade levels, subject matter, institutional contexts, or geographic

locations. Additionally, several of the participants self-identified as neurodiverse and while self-identification is appropriate for phenomenological research as well as neurodiversity-affirming approaches, it introduces variability in diagnostic history, support needs, and personal understanding of neurodivergence. These individual differences may have shaped how participants interpreted and described their lived experiences.

This study was also bound geographically and contextually with all participants having taught in the same Mid-Atlantic state during the COVID-19 pandemic with three counties represented and one charter school. The COVID-19 pandemic was marked by significant variation in educational policies, technology access, leadership structures, and district-level responses. The contextual differences limit the transferability of the findings to working in other national or international settings. Research from Turkey, Chile, and England has shown that globally, educators' experiences during the pandemic differed based on infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and cultural expectations (Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022; Jayman & Lynam, 2024). Therefore, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the context of U.S. secondary education.

Another limitation related to the use of self-report and retrospective reflection with data collected through semi-structured interviews in which the participants described experiences that occurred during a period of crisis and rapid change. Retrospective accounts may be influenced by memory, emotional distance, or meaning-making that evolved over time. While reflection can deepen insight, it may also introduce recall bias or selective emphasis. Participants' narratives likely reflect both their lived experiences

and the interpretations they constructed in the months and years following the onset of the pandemic.

My positionality also represents an inherent limitation. In IPA, the researchers serve as the primary instrument of analysis, engaging in a double hermeneutic in which participants make meaning of their experiences and the researcher interprets those meanings (Smith et al., 2022). Although reflexive journaling, bracketing, and adherence to IPA procedures were used to enhance trustworthiness, complete neutrality is neither possible nor expected in phenomenological inquiry. As the researcher, my background, professional experiences, and familiarity with neurodiversity may have shaped interpretive decisions despite efforts to manage these influences.

Lastly, the study was conducted during a unique global historical moment: the abrupt transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conditions educators faced with school closures, health concerns, technology availability, and shortage, as well as shifting policies, were unprecedented. As a result, the findings may not generalize to other types of emergency transitions or future crises that may unfold under different circumstances. The pandemic also created overlapping stressors unrelated to teaching, like family responsibilities and community disruptions, which may have influenced participants' experiences which are difficult to isolate. Also, because the study focused exclusively on neurodiverse educators, the absence of a neurotypical comparison group limits the ability to determine which experiences were unique to neurodiverse educators and which could be shared by others within the profession. Although existing literature suggests that many challenges, such as emotional strain, lack of preparedness,

and technological overload, were common among educators globally, neurodivergent-specific vulnerabilities and strengths could not be directly contrasted within this study. Taken together, these limitations clarify the contextual boundaries within which the findings should be understood as well as highlight the areas where further exploration is needed. In keeping with IPA's commitment to deepening understanding through continued inquiry, the following recommendations outline opportunities for future research that build upon the insights of this study.

Recommendations

This study explored the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the findings contribute new insights to an under-researched area, they also point to several new areas of inquiry. Following IPA's idiographic focus (Smith et al., 2022), these recommendations are not intended to generalize broadly but to guide research that can further deepen understanding of neurodivergent educators' experiences across diverse contexts. Each recommendation is grounded in the limitations of this present study, the identified gaps in the literature, and the contributions of the findings. One key direction for future research is to conduct studies of neurodiverse educators with larger and more diverse samples. This study used a small, purposeful sample consistent with IPA methodology, but the experience of neurodiverse educators likely varies across grade levels, subject areas, geographic regions, school types, diagnostic profiles, and even cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. Expanding the diversity of participants would allow researchers to explore how these intersecting identities and context shape the

experiences of self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptation. While IPA studies will continue to prioritize depth over generalizability, researchers might consider multi-site qualitative designs or mixed-methods approaches that preserve idiographic richness while still offering a broader insight into patterns across settings and other contexts.

Another avenue for future research would be comparing the experiences of neurodiverse educators with those of neurotypical educators. Because the present study focused exclusively on neurodiverse educators, it was not possible to determine which challenges and interpretations of their experiences were unique to this population or those that could be shared across the profession during the pandemic. Comparative studies could examine differences in emotional responses, executive functioning demands, sensory overload, relational strain, adaptation, resilience, and self-efficacy. Such work would help to clarify the distinct contributions and needs of neurodiverse educators as well as help the school systems create supports that are responsive to the full range of educator experiences.

Future research is also needed to explore the experiences of neurodiverse educators in non-crisis context. Much of the existing literature on neurodivergent adults focuses on workplace challenges, discrimination, and barriers to employment (Kornblau et al., 2019; Schreuer & Dorot, 2017; Rowe et al., 2021). However, very little research has examined the everyday teaching experiences of neurodiverse educators outside of emergency conditions. Studies that investigate how neurodiverse educators navigate typical school environments, how masking and sensory sensitivities influence daily teaching, how leadership practices shape well-being, and how neurodiverse strengths like

creativity, hyperfocus, or pattern recognition contribute to instructional practice. These considerations would provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the professional lives of neurodiverse educators. This research could help schools better support these educators year-round, and not only during periods of crisis.

The findings of this study also point to the need for research on neurodiversity-affirming leadership and professional development models. Participants emphasized the importance of clear communication, predictable structures, and supportive leadership. This suggests that school-level practices play a significant role in shaping neurodivergent educators' experiences. Future studies could also examine leadership approaches that best support neurodiverse educators and professional development models designed with neurodiversity in mind. Researchers could also explore how neurodiversity-affirming workplace accommodations influence educator retention, job satisfaction, and instructional innovation. Such work would contribute to the growing body of literature on inclusive organizational practices and could also inform school-wide efforts to create more supportive environments for all educators.

Longitudinal research is also a possible avenue for further research. Both Bandura (2001) and Garmezy (1993) emphasized that self-efficacy and resilience evolve over time, but little is known about how these processes unfold for neurodiverse educators. A longitudinal study could track educators across multiple years to examine how self-efficacy and adaptability change with experience, how resilience develops in response to ongoing challenges, and how educators integrate lessons learned during the pandemic into long-term practice. Such research could also explore how neurodiverse educators

adapt to new technologies, policies, or instructional modes, which could offer deeper insight into the cyclical relationship between self-efficacy and resilience identified in this study.

Future research should also investigate the impact of workplace accommodations and disclosure practices. The literature indicates that neurodiverse adults often struggle with whether to disclose their diagnosis due to stigma, misunderstanding, or fear of discrimination (Albright et al., 2020; Twaronite, 2020). Participants in this study described similar hesitancy around seeking support. Studies that examine how neurodiverse educators decide whether to disclose their diagnosis, how disclosure affects workplace relationships, which accommodations are most effective in school settings, and how school culture influences educators' sense of belonging would provide valuable insight. Research might also explore how neurodiverse educators self-accommodate when formal supports are lacking. These points of inquiry could inform policies that promote inclusivity, reduce stigma, and foster environments where neurodiverse educators feel safe and supported.

Lastly, future research could examine student outcomes in classrooms led by neurodiverse educators. Participants in this study demonstrated strengths such as creativity, innovation, deep focus, reflective thinking, and unique problem-solving approaches, which suggests that neurodiverse educators may contribute meaningfully to student learning and engagement. Studies that explore how neurodiverse educators' instructional adaptations influence student outcomes, how students respond to their teaching styles, whether their experiences contributed to more inclusive classroom

practices, and how they support neurodiverse students, could provide further insight into how neurodiverse educators contribute to their school communities. Such research could extend the strengths-based perspectives demonstrated in this current study and deepen the understanding of the value neurodiverse educators bring to the profession.

These recommendations point toward several promising directions for future research while the findings of this study also carry meaningful implications for practice, theory, methodology, and positive social change. The implications emerge directly from the lived experiences of neurodiverse educators who participated in this study and reflect broader patterns identified in the literature on educator self-efficacy, resilience, and neurodiversity in the workplace. Staying consistent with Smith et al.'s (2022) IPA's idiographic orientation, these implications are not intended to generalize beyond the context represented here but can illuminate considerations that may be relevant to similar educational environments.

Implications

The findings point to several opportunities for strengthening educational practices, particularly in the areas of crisis preparedness, instructional continuity, professional development, leadership communication, workplace inclusivity, relational support, and equity-driven planning. Participants described instructional disorientation, compressed timelines, and technological overload during the transition to online teaching, experiences which are mirrored in global research documenting educators' limited preparation for remote teaching (An et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2022; Güneş & Toran, 2022). The absence of clear action plans and communication structure undermined self-

efficacy and heightened stress. This would suggest that schools and districts would benefit from developing comprehensive instructional continuity plans that include clear protocols for transitions between instructional modalities, standardized technology platforms, and accessible training for educators and students. Revisiting these plans regularly and practicing them proactively can help ensure readiness in the face of future disruptions. Professional development also emerged as a critical area for improvement. Participants reported that learning new platforms was overwhelming, but the deeper challenge involved how to teach effectively in online or hybrid environments. These findings align with research that emphasized that educators require professional development focused on pedagogical integration rather than tool operation alone (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) characteristics of effective professional development, modeling, active learning, collaboration, and sustained duration, were largely absent during the pandemic. For neurodiverse educators, professional development incorporated clear instructions, predictable routines, hands on practice, and multimodal learning opportunities may be especially beneficial in supporting both self-efficacy and resilience.

Leadership practices played a significant role in shaping participants' experiences. The PET of Leadership Impact demonstrated how administrative communication influenced educators' confidence, emotional well-being, and adaptability. Transparent, consistent communication served as a protective factor, while ambiguous or inconsistent communication contributed to burnout. These findings aligned with research showing that connectedness to administrators enhanced educator resilience and self-efficacy

(Yang et al., 2021). For neurodiverse educators, leadership communication that reduces ambiguity, uses straightforward language, and provides opportunities for clarification can help mitigate cognitive and sensory load as well as strengthen resilience.

This study also highlights the need for neurodiversity-affirming workplace practices. Participants described challenges related to sensory overload, executive function strain, and concerns about judgement or misunderstanding, experiences that are found in existing neurodiversity literature (see Das et al., 2021; Kornblau et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2021). Schools can support neurodiverse educators by offering flexible workspaces, allowing the use of organizational tools and self-accommodations, providing disclosure pathways without fear of stigma, and offering training on neurodiversity for administrators and colleagues that extend beyond students. Such practices align with Albright et al. (2020) and Twaronite (2020) and can enhance self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability.

Relational support also emerged as a critical area of need. Participants described isolation, loss of connection, and difficulty engaging students. These experiences were intensified for some by social communication differences or masking behaviors which are consistent with findings from Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019) and Cook et al. (2021). Strengthening relational support systems through structured opportunities for collaboration, mentorship programs, regular check-ins, and communities of practice can help rebuild self-efficacy through vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 2001). These supports also serve as resilience-activating resources, as shown in Abramson et al. (2015), by helping educators navigate periods of uncertainty.

The PET of equity-driven access revealed that inequalities in students' and families' access to technology and learning supports significantly shaped educators' experiences. These findings aligned with the global research showing that inequalities in access were among the most significant challenges during the pandemic (An et al., 2021; Güneş & Toran, 2022). Ensuring equitable access to devices, internet connectivity, multilingual communication, and technical support can reduce instructional barriers that promote both educator resilience and student success. Including neurodiverse educators in planning discussions may further strengthen equity-driven approaches since their lived experiences often position them to anticipate access barriers that others may overlook.

The findings of this study have broader implications for positive social change at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. At the individual level, recognizing neurodiverse educators as valuable contributors with unique strengths can help reduce stigma and promote a more inclusive understanding of professional competence. At the organizational level, adopting neurodiversity-affirming practices can improve workplace culture, enhance educator retention, and foster environments where diverse communication and working styles are normalized. At the societal level, supporting neurodiverse educators contributes to more equitable and resilient school systems. It also models inclusive practices for students, families, and their communities. These implications remain within the boundaries of the study's findings while also promoting meaningful opportunities for educational systems to further promote well-being and honor neurodiversity.

This study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of self-efficacy and resilience by illustrating how these constructs interact dynamically in the context of neurodiverse educators navigating instructional disruption. The findings suggest that self-efficacy and resilience are mutually reinforcing and are shaped by environmental clarity, relational support, and opportunities for mastery. This study also highlighted neurodiversity strengths in adaptive functioning like hyperfocus, creativity, innovation; thus, offering a strengths-based perspective that extends existing theoretical frameworks.

Additionally, the study contributes to IPA scholarship by demonstrating the value of idiographic inquiry for understanding neurodivergent experiences in educational settings, particularly during periods of rapid change. IPA's emphasis on depth, meaning-making, and double hermeneutic allowed for nuanced interpretation of emotional, cognitive, and relational processes that may be overlooked in broader survey-based or quantitative studies (Smith et al., 2022). The findings suggest that future qualitative research on neurodiversity in education may benefit from similar interpretive, idiographic approaches to honor the complexity of individual experiences while simultaneously illuminating broader patterns of meaning. Together, these implications highlight the significance of understanding neurodiverse educators' experiences through a lens that values depth, context and lived meaning. The conclusion that follows synthesizes the study's contributions and reflects on its broader significance for research, practice, and educational equity.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of neurodiverse secondary educators who transitioned from on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using IPA, the research illuminated how participants made sense of a period marked by uncertainty, emotional strain, instructional disruption, and rapid adaptation. Consistent with Smith et al. (2022), emphasis on idiographic depth and the double hermeneutic, the findings reflect both the educators' meaning making and the interpretive lenses applied to their accounts.

By interpreting through Bandura's social cognitive theory and Garmezy's resilience theory, the findings revealed the dynamic and reciprocal interplay between self-efficacy, resilience, and adaptability. Participants experienced significant emotional and cognitive challenges, but they were also able to demonstrate creativity, reflective insight, and innovation. Their narratives underscored the importance of clear communication, relational support, equitable access, and neurodiversity-affirming practices in shaping their ability to navigate crisis conditions brought on by the pandemic.

The implications and recommendations presented in this chapter offered pathways to strengthening professional development, leadership practices, crisis preparedness, and workplace inclusivity. They also highlight the need for continued research on neurodiverse educators in both crisis contexts and everyday environments. By recognizing neurodiverse educators as valuable contributors with unique strengths, education systems can promote more equitable, resilient, and inclusive learning communities.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that affirms neurodiversity as an essential dimension of the educator workforce. The insights gained demonstrate not only the challenges neurodiverse educators faced during the pandemic but also their resilience and the meaningful adaptations they achieved. These findings invite schools, districts, and policymakers to envision an educational environment where neurodiverse educators are understood, supported, and empowered to thrive.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Hello, my name is Leane Pupo. I am a PhD scholar at Walden University. I truly appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. This study seeks to investigate the experiences of neurodiverse educators transitioning from on-ground to online and it could help school districts and administrators better understand and help their educators. To achieve this, you are invited to describe your experiences transitioning from on-ground to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please note that you are not obligated to partake in this study and you are free to withdraw at any point throughout the process. Your consent attests to the interview proceeding to be recorded. This will allow me to capture your detailed responses and ensure the accuracy of your responses. However, if at any point you feel the need, please do not hesitate to ask me to stop the recording. At that time, I will thank you for your time and interest and stop the interview. I am obligated to keep your identity throughout this study confidential.

Research Question:

The following research questions were used to guide this study.

RQ 1: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe their lived experience transitioning to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 2: How do neurodiverse secondary school educators describe the lived experience of the effects of this transition on their resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to adapt?

Interview Questions

1. What was your experience like transitioning from teaching on-ground to online during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Can you tell me about the main differences between a day at work before the COVID-19 pandemic and a day at work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Can you tell me about how this experience had an effect on your self-efficacy as an educator?
4. Can you describe an experience related to your adaptability or resiliency as an educator?

Prompts for Going Deeper:

- Why?
- How?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Tell me what you were thinking.
- How did you feel?

Thank you again for committing your time to this study by providing relevant information that will make this study a success. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any additional questions or to clarify information within the next two weeks. I may contact you again if further clarification is needed. Thank you sincerely. I truly appreciate your participation.