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THE CONFIDENCE OF HIGH SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION (SPED) TEACHERS TO DELIVER INSTRUCTION IN A 100% VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT DUE TO COVID-19

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By

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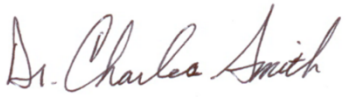

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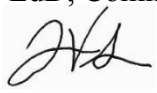

James Shuls, PhD, Dean, College of Education

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord, Jesus Christ, and for the glory of God. My prayer is to bear much fruit for God's kingdom through this degree and to empower and equip others to do the same. I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Ebony James, my two sons, Legend Elisha and Conquer Elias, and my future children. This dissertation is also dedicated to my mother, Theresa Ann Bogan; you have sacrificed so much for me to be where I am today. Legend and Conquer, may you both follow my example to abandon your plans, dreams, and desires to pursue the dream of God for your life. May you both choose to allow God's glorious Name to be magnified through your life.

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had substantially altered others' daily social interactions and the delivery of education globally. From preschool to universities, educational institutions worldwide temporarily closed their brick-and-mortar facilities to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The transition from in-person to virtual learning was very abrupt, and the transition forced teachers of all experience levels to adapt to a new normal of virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school special education teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Five high school SPED teachers participated in virtual interviews using Zoom video conferencing. Results of the study revealed three salient themes: communication, online instruction, and teachers' ability to adapt. Two subthemes of online instruction were identified: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction. Results of the study indicated the need for teachers to have a streamlined online process for the documentation, delivery, and reporting of special education services. Findings suggested that teachers need professional development available to them that would be tailored to online teaching strategies, student engagement strategies, online platforms that could be utilized to enhance instruction, and virtual tools that could assist teachers in providing services for students with IEPs. Future research using a mixed-methods approach among high school SPED teachers would allow investigators to gather additional qualitative and quantitative data.

Keywords: special education teachers, special education students, virtual learning

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I. Introduction

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease that originated from Wuhan, China and has emerged as a global pandemic (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). Research that examines teachers' perception of their readiness to teach online during COVID-19 and the transition from in-person to online instruction made by many teachers and students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic would prove beneficial to educational stakeholders in the event of another global shutdown of schools. As the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic spread, many grade schools, colleges, and universities indefinitely closed brick-and-mortar locations to prevent the spread of the virus, and a heavy push for online instruction was implemented (Hung & Wati, 2020).

Martin et al.'s (2019) quantitative study that examined faculty perception of their readiness to teach online revealed that novice online faculty perceived that they were not ready to deliver online instruction. The researchers measured readiness through faculty attitudes about the significance of online teaching competencies and faculty's perceptions of their ability to teach online confidently. Data captured from the MANOVA showed a significant difference in years of teaching online and delivery methods concerning perceived ability to teach online.

The researchers also uncovered that female faculty placed higher importance on online competencies. The researchers' findings indicated that faculty with minimal to no online teaching experience had lower perceptions of their ability to deliver online instruction than faculty with more than five years' experience (Martin et al., 2019). Faculty members who were new to online teaching had lower perceptions of their ability to teach online.

Despite teachers' online teaching experience, shutdown measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within schools required numerous teachers and students to teach and learn from home, which essentially created a new version of "home-school" (Hung & Wati, 2020, p. 36). Though virtual learning is not unique to 21st-century education, virtual learning can add to the current challenges teachers face in education. Now that unprecedented numbers of teachers and students are required to function within the virtual learning environment (Hung & Wati, 2020), a study that examines high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver instruction to exceptional children within an online learning environment will prove to be beneficial.

Background of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the face of education worldwide. Due to the pandemic, teachers and students utilized online learning environments in large numbers never seen before in history. COVID-19 expedited online learning in education following an abrupt closure of academic institutions, which initiated virtual learning at all educational levels (Afshan & Ahmed, 2020). Given the impact that the COVID-19 virus has had on society, the likelihood of online learning continuing beyond the "COVID era" is high. According to Afshan and Ahmed, a hybrid education model with blended learning (in-person and online instruction) will permanently emerge due to COVID-19. The requirement to abide by social distancing mandates and rules will influence schools to restrict classroom activities and hands-on practical training sessions to limited student numbers and increased online instruction.

In a 2020 study of 1,217 Israeli college students who transitioned to synchronous online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers reported that students exhibited a widespread adverse reaction to online education due to the pandemic in comparison to the responses from the more typical face-to-face learning conditions (Besser et al., 2020). Their

cross-sectional study investigated the associations among adaptability, personality, and levels of learning experiences amongst college students forced to adapt to a rapid transition to synchronous online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, positive reactions to the online learning environment due to COVID-19 were associated with adaptability and personality traits. Teachers and students were forced to adapt to online learning in unprecedented numbers. The researchers' study depicted how individuals' ability to adapt and their personality traits impacted their reactions to face-to-face online learning. Though every teacher and student are different, the researchers described a generally adverse response to online education transition due to COVID-19 amongst the college students. Therefore, school districts may benefit by helping students and teachers adapt to large-scale online learning in response to global health crises or natural disasters.

COVID-19 pushed much of education into the virtual space, which has strengthened opportunities to study online instruction effectiveness, online professional development, students' and teachers' perception of online learning and teaching, and digital devices and access limitations. Teachers and students need adequate and reliable digital devices and sufficient internet access to teach and learn virtually. Before the pandemic, the "digital divide" around the world amongst the poor was very evident, even in America, but the pandemic has significantly widened the gap (Hung & Wati, 2020, p.39). Thus, the digital divide is another barrier that teachers must face when delivering online instruction to all of their students. Teachers understanding of these challenges may also affect their confidence to provide adequate education to their students.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation

This study utilized the interpretive framework of social constructivism. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), research conducted within a social constructivism framework aims to understand the participants' world in which they live and work. The researcher acknowledged that background can shape interpretation, and the researcher was committed to interpreting participants' constructions of meaning in their reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When researchers conduct qualitative research, they invite the idea of multiple truths. Social constructivism is a type of grounded theory, and researchers following this interpretive framework will seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. The researchers build subjective meanings of their experiences, and the goal of the research is to heavily rely on the participants' views of the phenomenon.

Researchers can make four philosophical assumptions when undergoing a qualitative study: epistemological, axiological, methodological, and ontological. An epistemological assumption requires the researcher to rely on subjective evidence from participants, such as quotes, and the researcher will spend time in the field with participants as an "insider" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.20). The axiological assumption can look like a researcher freely discussing values that fashion the narrative and includes their interpretation in conjunction with those of the participants. The methodological assumption calls for researchers to use inductive logic, study the topic within context, and use an emerging design. This study focused on ontological assumptions.

A researcher applying an ontological assumption to the qualitative research would report different perspectives as themes unfold within their findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research crafted through social constructivism with ontological beliefs embraces the thought that several realities are formed through the participants' lived experiences and social interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a phenomenological qualitative study, such as the study at hand, researchers would report how participants view the experience of the phenomenon differently (Moustakas, 1994).

As seen through ontological beliefs, social constructivism fits this study because all participants had their reality of the phenomenon, delivering SPED services to students solely through online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each teacher interviewed presented their unique reality of the phenomenon influenced by their life experiences and social interactions with others. This study investigated how high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver SPED instruction to their students was affected by the reality of being required to provide solely online instruction within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19.

Problem Statement

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had substantially altered others' daily social interactions and the delivery of education globally. From preschool to universities, educational institutions worldwide temporarily closed their brick-and-mortar facilities to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Shutdown measures required numerous teachers and students to teach and learn from home, which essentially created a new version of "home-school" (Hung & Wati, 2020, pp.39). The transition from in-person to virtual learning was very abrupt, and the transition forced teachers of all experience levels to adapt to a new normal of virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though virtual learning was not new to 21st-century education, virtual learning added to the many challenges that were already being faced in education. With the unprecedented numbers of teachers and students required to function within the virtual learning environment (Hung & Wati, 2020), how did the pandemic affect high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver instruction to exceptional children? The aim of this study was to answer that question by exploring the perceptions of virtual learning on high school SPED teachers' confidence to provide instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19.

Widespread virtual learning due to COVID-19 has inevitably impacted all stakeholders in education. A study exploring how virtual learning affected teachers' confidence in delivering sound instruction, specifically the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to provide services, warranted consideration. The world's response to the COVID-19 pandemic called for many educational institutions to adopt virtual learning, but the virtual learning environment was unsatisfying in some aspects (Hung &Wati, 2020). COVID-19 forced students and teachers worldwide to face a unique phenomenon of isolation that had never been previously experienced. Many students felt as though they missed the face-to-face interactions with their peers and teachers and the school's structured routine. The pandemic had provided researchers with an opportunity to explore the virtual learning environment's strengths and weaknesses and the electronic tools used to deliver information and instruction in education like never before.

Research that would provide a specific study of how virtual learning perceptions due to COVID-19 influenced SPED instructors' confidence in delivering instruction to their students would provide valuable data. The research opportunity to explore the impacts of isolation, social distancing, and technology during a pandemic was vast. The pandemic allowed researchers to also look at teachers' transitions from traditional classroom instruction to a virtual experience.

According to Hung and Wati (2020), three significant areas challenged all virtual teachers and students: the digital divide, epistemological concern, and ethics of existence. The "digital divide" (p. 39) referred to the unequal distribution of internet access and cellular networks between countries and areas. Across the globe, not all students had access to digital platforms, services, and resources provided by the government or global networks during the COVID-19 school closures. The pandemic exacerbated the digital divide amongst countries and social-economic classes worldwide, including in America. Virtual learning, specifically virtual asynchronous learning, created a learning experience for unguided and individualistic students.

In contrast, the physical presence of teachers helps to make learning worthwhile, dialogical, and approachable. The second draw-back of virtual learning is that virtual education cannot freely and directly meet students' psychological, physical, and emotional needs (Hung & Wati, 2020). The third challenge of virtual learning mentioned by Hung and Wati involved the lack of human interaction experience. SPED teachers are faced with all of these same challenges, plus the additional challenge of providing adequate services to their students.

Due to the lack of research in this area concerning how virtual learning influences high school SPED teachers, this study will contribute meaningful data in this area. The study was carried out as a phenomenological qualitative study. Individual stories or experiences of high school SPED teachers who share in the experience of teaching and administering services to students within a 100% virtual learning environment was captured. The potential data that this study provided can be utilized to improve the virtual learning experience for teachers and students. Data can also be used to better equip schools and school districts to know where and how to fill the gaps of service provided due to virtual learning.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Virtual learning was generally defined as the primary delivery of the learning experience through a web-based platform and digital devices (Hung & Wati, 2020).

Overview of Methodology

This study was conducted as a phenomenological qualitative study to assess how transitioning to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence and ability to instruct their students. The data collection was carried out through virtual interviews. The aim of the study was to understand and describe the reality of each teachers' narratives of their experience and feelings of delivering instruction virtually and producing an in-depth description of providing virtual education due to COVID-19.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question:

1. How has the transition to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence to instruct their students?

Research Design

This phenomenological qualitative study utilized virtual interviews of high school SPED teachers to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction had influenced teachers' confidence to instruct their students. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes.

Using a phenomenological research design allowed the researcher to capture the meaning and understanding of the special education teachers' lived experience as a virtual instructor. The common phenomenon was that all high school special education teachers were thrust into an online environment as the primary delivery of their instruction to their students from March 2020 to February 2021. The design of this study investigated the teachers' experience and their perception of their ability to deliver sound instruction in a 100% virtual environment.

In the study, the researcher reported how teachers viewed the experience of the phenomenon differently (Moustakas, 1994). As seen through ontological beliefs, social constructivism was the best fit for the study because all of the teachers had their reality of the phenomenon, delivering SPED services to students solely through online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each teacher interviewed presented their unique reality of the phenomenon influenced by their life experiences and social interactions with others.

Data Collection

The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a Tennessee school district that was 100% virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers were briefed on the study's purpose and assured appropriate measures would be taken to maintain ethical guidelines. Teachers were also given an informed IRB consent outlining the potential benefits and harms of the study, assurance of anonymity, and data protection. The researcher interviewed teachers regarding their lived experience of teaching virtually due to the pandemic to understand how virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic had affected high school SPED teachers' confidence in delivering SPED services to students in a 100% virtual environment.

Snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was the sampling method employed for the study. Participating teachers were asked to refer another SPED teacher for the study, and teachers were made aware that a teacher referral was not mandatory. The researcher leveraged teachers' relationships with other SPED teachers within the school district to identify study participants.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was gained from Southeastern University (SEU), the researcher emailed potential high school SPED teachers requesting their study participation. Teacher emails were accessed using the participating school district's contact database. The emails included the overview and purpose of the study. After receiving the teacher's acceptance, the researchers emailed an informed consent and a link to schedule a virtual interview with the teachers. The researcher sent a follow-up email to participants that contained the audio recording and transcription of the interview for the teacher's review for validation. Once accuracy was confirmed, the researcher began to code the transcript and identify all of the data's themes. Once the data were analyzed, the researcher made recommendations and shared findings with participating teachers, the administrators, and the school district.

Overview of Analyses

The researcher coded the data for a theme and developed a central theme with categories. The analysis of the axial coding resulted in information gathered around causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, and consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Preliminary Analysis

The preliminary analysis of the data began with open coding. The data collected was coded for its major categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher

aggregated and interpreted the data. When open coding was complete, the researcher created axial coding, which consisted of categories created around the identified core phenomenon.

Data Analysis by Research Questions

The researcher took the information gathered from open and axial coding and presented a coding paradigm through a visual model that identified the central phenomenon, explored causal conditions, specified strategies, identified the context and intervening conditions, and delineated the consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Limitations

Qualitative studies tend to take on a phenomenological view in which "reality inheres in the perceptions of individuals" (Joyner et al., 2018, p.82). The researcher examined the findings in this study within the context of the study limitations. Because of the phenomenological qualitative research design, the sample was relatively small, and, accordingly, readers should interpret results with caution. The participant sample only included high school SPED teachers, as outcomes may be similar or different considering if the researcher took participants from the elementary or middle school levels. The study was also limited by one geographical area.

Definition of Key Terms

The following words and phrases are key terms for the study.

- **special education teachers**: Teachers who are specifically trained to educate individuals with special education in suitable environments to fulfill these individuals' educational and social needs that meet their developmental features and academic capabilities (Levent, 2016).
- **special education students**: Students who receive services and accommodations because of their significant difference compared to their coevals on personal and

developmental features and educational capabilities due to various reasons (Levent, 2016).

- **virtual learning**: The primary delivery of the learning experience through a web-based platform and digital devices (Hung & Wati, 2020).

Significance

This study was conducted to understand how the transition to virtual learning amid a crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, affected SPED teachers' confidence to deliver SPED instruction within a 100% virtual learning environment. Data gathered from the study were aimed at helping school districts develop better disaster preparedness plans to target high school SPED teachers' efficacy to deliver SPED services to their students in a 100% virtual environment. COVID-19 changed the face of education and caused the most significant known transition in history from in-person learning to virtual learning. Study data were also aimed to help school districts develop meaningful professional development for all teachers and provide insight into what negatively affects teachers' confidence to deliver instruction.

The benefits of the study are not limited to teacher and district improvements. The study can positively impact students' academic growth, as teachers and school districts improve upon online instruction and professional development that prepares teachers for virtual instruction in the future. The study provided school administration with data and recommendations on how to increase teacher readiness and confidence to deliver online instruction. The study also advanced the guiding framework and contributed to the literature on teacher readiness for virtual instruction, guided improvements in exceptional students' academic achievement, and shed light on necessary district-wide professional development to improve online instruction.

II. Review of Literature

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. A review of recent literature pertaining to the teacher readiness for online instruction, the delivery of online special education instruction, and schools transitioning from in-person to online instruction due to COVID-19 paint a clear background to the study.

As new technologies develop, teachers must seek new approaches to structure, deliver, and assess courses and curricula for online teaching (Martin et al., 2019). Some researchers would argue that a teacher's past teaching experience serves as a sole foundation to online teaching; however, some researchers oppose such thought. Ko and Rossen (2017) argued that an online setting differs from an instructor teaching in a traditional, face-to-face classroom environment.

Martin et al. (2019) conducted a study that examined faculty perception of their readiness to teach online. The study examined four areas of online teaching competencies: technical competency, course communication, course design, and time management. The four competencies were based on the researchers' review of literature and existing readiness instruments. The purpose of their study was to examine faculty perceptions on their readiness to

teach online by examining their attitude about the importance of competencies and their perception of their ability to teach online. The study had two research questions:

1. What are faculty attitudes on the importance of online teaching competencies and faculty's perception of their ability to confidently teach online?
2. What demographic factors are related to faculty attitudes about online teaching competencies and their ability to teach online?

The researchers developed their own instrument, Faculty Readiness to Teach Online (FRTO), based upon their literature references and review of other instruments. The significant literature reviewed was that of Downing and Dyment (2013), Gay (2016), and Lichoro (2015), which specified an instrument and framework to measure teacher readiness to teach online. A 20-item readiness instrument from the University of Toledo (2017) and a 30-item survey from Pennsylvania State University (2017) were also reviewed. Martin et al. believed that both instruments failed to capture the entirety of faculty readiness in a way that would satisfy their desired research approach. Therefore, they selected the broader categories of the University of Toledo survey (time management, technical competency, communication, and design) and some of the question items from the Pennsylvania State University survey to construct the FRTO instrument. In addition, the researchers' instrument contained two major constructs: perception of ability and attitude based on importance. Each construct used the same items (design, communication, time management, and technical competency), and participants were asked to rate how significant each competence was for online teaching and self-efficacy to complete the tasks based upon the judgment of their own competencies.

Martin et al.'s (2019) study was a survey-based study that utilized the SurveyShare electronic tool to deliver surveys to three United States distribution lists: the American Research Association (AERA) Online Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group (250 members), the Association for Educational Communications Technology (AECT; 1,984 members), and a United States public southeastern university's faculty (529 members). Two hundred and five faculty responded to the survey. Out of the 205 respondents, 144 or 70% were female, 56 or 27% were male, and 5 or 3% did not identify their gender. The participants from all three lists were not statistically significantly different from each other concerning years of teaching, years of teaching online, age, and gender. Therefore, the researchers grouped all participants for analyses.

Findings from the study showed that the competencies that instructors perceived as most significant in all competency areas differed from the top competencies that faculty believed they could accomplish. Faculty rated the design of online learning activities and course orientations as very important in course design. Faculty perceived their ability to organize online instructional materials and assessments to be high. The faculty rated their ability to send announcements and email communication as tasks that they could successfully accomplish. Faculty rated scheduling time for course design and grading as very important in time management, and faculty perceived their ability to accomplish these tasks as high. Faculty also rated managing learning management systems and basic computer operations as significantly important technical competencies, and their ability to accomplish these tasks was rated high. The researchers' study also revealed that female faculty members displayed significantly higher perceptions of the value of course communication, design, and time management in comparison to their male counterparts. Lastly, faculty with online teaching experience had higher perceived levels of proficiency to deliver instruction that displayed pedagogical aptitudes than novice instructors.

Studies centered on teaching aptitudes in the online environment can provide significant insight on how professional development can be crafted to assist and support online faculty in higher education institutions (Martin et al., 2019). Martin et al.'s study provided implications for three groups:

1. Faculty teaching online and faculty preparing to deliver online instruction
2. Instructional facilitators who support instructors in online instruction
3. Administrators who support faculty in online instruction

Martin et al.'s (2019) study contained several limitations. An initial limitation was the low response rate (205 responders out of a sample of 2,763). The sample of responders was not a clear representation of the target population of online instructors. A significant portion of the responders was faculty in the education department, but having faculty from various disciplines would have been ideal. Also, the researchers did not have an exhaustive list of competencies. The suggestions for future studies included expanding the list of competencies and categories not included in Martin et al.'s study and examining the virtual teaching environments of community colleges and K-12.

Gay (2016) conducted a study about the online instructor e-learning readiness (e-readiness) before, during, and after course delivery. The reference to e-readiness throughout the study refers to an instructor's aptitude to utilize an electronic learning system (ELS) and its technical tools. Launching from the DeLone and McLean model (2004), Gay's (2016) study extended the metrics utilized to evaluate ELS by highlighting the exceptional characteristics that described e-ready online instructors at a Caribbean university that effectively utilized ELS. Gay's (2016) findings served as a benchmark for comparing the rate of e-readiness before, during, and after course delivery, and assessing strengths and hurdles affecting e-ready online teachers over

the duration of an online course. The research questions addressed in the study were the following:

1. What are the necessary attributes of an e-ready online instructor?
2. What is the level of e-readiness of online instructors in this university system?
3. How does online instructor e-readiness impact:
    a. ELS quality, information quality, and service quality during pre-course preparation?
    b. ELS use and user satisfaction during course delivery?
    c. Net benefits at course completion?

Gay's (2016) study was conducted at a Caribbean university with four campuses, including an online campus. The online campus contained two categories of online instructors: course coordinators and e-tutors. The online instructors targeted 500 online instructors from 17 Caribbean countries employed at the virtual campus. The instructors were studied for two semesters. The only online training that the instructors received was a 5-week mandatory online training course in managing the ELS.

The data collection of the survey was accomplished through an online survey instrument composed of two sections: demographics and ELS success. The ELS success section contained 31 items adopted from three instruments in order to capture responses from six factors. The measurements of the ELS quality, and information and quality service quality, constituted the pre-course scale. The course delivery scale consisted of the measurements of user satisfaction and system use. The net benefits measurements contained the completion scale. A Likert scale was used for all question items, ranging from 1-5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree". The e-readiness section of the survey was designed by the University of

Kentucky Distance Learning Technology Center, and this section compared those who showed substantial readiness for the ELS with those who were unprepared. The e-readiness section of the survey used three scales: technical readiness, lifestyle readiness, and pedagogical readiness. The e-readiness section of the survey also used the same Likert scale ranges as the ELS success section (Guy, 2016).

Research question one was tested by utilizing the item that corresponded to the highest mean score in each pedagogical readiness, technical readiness, and lifestyle readiness scale as the basis of the necessary attributes that identified an online instructor as e-ready. The lowest mean scores in each of the three scales represented areas of deficiencies. To test the second research question, each mean value derived for the lifestyle, pedagogical, and technical readiness scales that were at least four or higher represented an acceptable indicator for online instructor e-readiness. The aggregate ratings of the three scales represented the overall e-readiness level of the instructors. The third research question, and its three sub questions, were tested through a linear regression analysis using the SPSS version 19 to identify the relationship between e-readiness and the factors at pre-course delivery (service quality, ELS quality, and information quality) (Guy, 2016).

The online survey consisted of a total of 220 responses across two semesters; 208 of these responses were complete and included in the study. The number of female respondents represented 78.4% of the total respondents, 28.4% of respondents taught from four to six years, 56.3% taught social science courses, and 86.5% of the respondents lived in one of the countries with a main campus. The survey results revealed that demographic attributes had no effect on lifestyle, pedagogical readiness, or technology. The cohort was deemed to be 90.6% e-ready, but only 72.6% of the online instructors were actually identified as e-ready. Deficits in lifestyle

readiness and pedagogical readiness items of instructors who were e-ready emphasized a predisposition for the traditional setting of in-person courses (face-to-face interactions and immediate verbal feedback) and a lack of discipline to complete tasks ahead of deadlines. The results of the study showed that e-readiness had an impact before course delivery, during course delivery, and after course completion. Information quality during the pre-course preparation was moderately impacted by e-readiness. A greater impact was shown during course delivery dependent upon instructor satisfaction, which lead to a positive impact at the end of the course. The positive benefits of e-readiness at course completion improved instructors' teaching skills and saved time in the ELS, but the negative impacts resulted in instructors' dependence on technology. An online instructor dictated the failure or success of ELSs because the instructors' level of e-readiness influenced e-learning success. The study was limited in that the results were subject to the context of universities. The survey was an online voluntary survey with 90% of the online instructors employed as e-tutors; 30% of the instructors were new to the online environment. The results of Gay's (2016) study offered a benchmark that can be used to pinpoint characteristics of online instructors appropriate for the online environment, identifying suitable training needs, and assessing online instructors' aptitude for online instruction prior to being assigned an online course to teach.

During mid-April 2020, over 1 billion learners, spanning 191 countries, were impacted by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). Researchers Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) distributed an international survey that collected the perspective of 1,186 teachers concerning their experiences pertaining to online teaching in the initial weeks of COVID-19 school closures. The focus of the research was to advise teacher educators about measures to empower teachers to cope with unforeseen crises that will impact

the classroom (Lund et al., 2019). The researchers analyzed teachers' readiness for virtual instruction in a global crisis situation through the lens of teacher agency. Teacher agency is the degree to which an instructor can do the work of teaching given the resources and limitations of their school or classroom environment, also encompassing teachers' values, attributes, and beliefs (Brevik et al., 2019; Lennert & Mølstad, 2020; Lund et al., 2019).

The analytical framework used within the study was the pedagogical, ethical, attitudinal, and technical dimensions (PEAT) model. The PEAT model served as a tool to categorize teachers' attributes to deliver virtual instruction and their capacity for teaching during school closures. The model was composed of four dimensions: pedagogical, attitudinal, ethical, and technical. The pedagogical dimension consisted of pedagogical framework with technology in various subjects. The ethical dimension constituted matters. such as plagiarism, privacy, and copyright issues in the virtual space. The attitudinal dimension consisted of the teachers' attitudes regarding technology, their capacity to adapt technology. The technical dimension consisted of the teachers' ability to use digital devices, software, and a comprehension of device operations (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

The online survey that was crafted to analyze teachers' readiness for virtual instruction in a global crisis situation through the lens of teacher agency contained eight open-ended questions addressing the following:

- regularity of online teaching,
- elaboration on preparation,
- consent,
- measures by schools/instructors to include vulnerable learners,
- additional comments on challenges and/or opportunities of growth,

- country and teaching level.

The survey was translated in 10 languages in total and first implemented in English and Norwegian languages. The researchers shared the link to the online survey on various social media platforms, also distributing the survey via personal emails to professional networks. The sampling method used in the study was snowball sampling. The English and Norwegian versions of the survey remained accessible for four weeks with 1,186 respondents across the globe. The respondents were largely from Norway (574) and the United States (239), respectively. The data pertaining to prior virtual instruction were analyzed descriptively. The researchers used thematic coding based on the four dimensions in the PEAT model to analyze descriptions on readiness (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

The analysis of data revealed that most of the Norway and US instructors did not possess prior online teaching experience before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the research findings, 92% of the US instructors had no online teaching experience, and 67% of the Norway instructors also possessed no prior online teaching experience. Only 5% of the US instructors frequently delivered online instruction, and 4% reported seldomly teaching online. In comparison to the US instructors, Norway instructors possessed more virtual instructional experience with 19% having seldomly taught online previously and 14% having taught often virtually. Both US and Norway instructors expressed their familiarity with digital tools they had access to and how they utilized these tools, such as Google Classroom. Some instructors discussed the pedagogical parameters of their online instruction, but very few teachers expounded on aspects of the ethical dimension (copyright, privacy, and source criticism) pertaining to online instruction. Overall, teachers' perceptions were positive, and the online instructors were willing to attempt new ways of teaching (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) reported that, even in the lack of experience with online teaching, teachers were willing and capable of transitioning to online instruction. The researchers listed five major implications of their research findings. The first implication was for an increased occurrence of modeling online instruction because most teachers did not possess prior experience of delivering online instruction. The suggestion was for teachers' educational training be used to serve as a time to model a blended learning environment to better equip teachers for in-person and online delivery of instruction (Hathaway & Norton, 2017). The second implication focused on emphasizing limited pedagogy. Most of the Norwegian and US instructors expressed that they had experience with various software and digital tools and had intentions of using these tools in their online classroom. However, the teachers' knowledge of these tools should be furthered via professional development and teacher education that would increase the pedagogical dimension of their online instruction. The third implication was the need for teachers to have online teaching field experience. The researchers suggested that teacher educators should coordinate moments where both pre-service and in-service teachers create lessons for virtual instruction, carry out those lessons with their students in an online learning environment with mentoring from teacher educators, and utilize reflective practice to analyze the lesson implementations. The fourth implication details the ethical dimension, which emphasized teachers' attempts to help students to cope with their current circumstances, supporting students in their online environment. The fifth implication was the replication of the TRIO survey. The survey could be adapted to explore the latter stages in school closures due to the pandemic and the timeliness of education stakeholders in responding to the needs of educators and students. Future research that could be built upon this study would explore how the positive practices and

coping strategies utilized in the online environment would or did transfer to physical classrooms when schools reopened (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

The study completed on Commerce Independent School District (CISD) explored the successes and lessons learned from this rural school district during the transition to virtual instruction to offer direction to school districts as they were navigating the obstacles associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Transitioning from in-person to virtual instruction was not an easy or smooth feat for many schools, especially for under-resourced, underserved rural school districts. A national survey administered to 477 school systems by Gross and Opalka (2020) during the onset of the pandemic reported that only 27% of rural schools had an expectation for their teachers to continue instruction, compared with more than 50% of urban schools. Before the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, an evaluation of the condition of rural education in America was executed by Showalter et al. (2019). The results of the evaluation highlighted that impoverished rural schools scored significantly lower than their more appropriately resourced peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. However, even with limited funding and challenges with serving special education students during a pandemic, some rural districts effectively leveraged the advantages of rural communities to satisfy student and family needs, such as CISD.

CISD is associated with the Tri County Shared Service Arrangement (SSA) of Texas. Tri County SSA provides teachers and administrators the assistance they need in order to administer high-quality special education services to special needs students in the Delta, Hopkins, and Hunt County school districts of Texas. The support provided by the Tri County SSA to the school districts includes the following: assessment support, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, counseling, and other related services via contract. CISD is the second largest school

district in the Tri County SSA and includes four schools (two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the district contained 2,931 families, 40% of the families were living in poverty, 78% of the families owned a computer, and 68% of the families had internet access. In 2020, the district serviced 1,603 students (48% Caucasian, 22% Black or African American, and 21% Hispanic) of which 64% received free and reduced lunch. CISD students were academically performing below state average in Texas's end-of-course exams, and the number of economically disadvantaged students who qualified for special education services exceeded the state's average (Tremmel et al., 2020).

The researchers sought to evaluate CISD's effectiveness in transitioning to online learning due to COVID-19. Virtual interviews were conducted between the researchers and the Assistant Superintendent and the Tri County SSA Director of Special Education. The themes that emerged were communication, collaboration, professional development and resource distribution, compliance, and efficient dissemination of state and federal guidelines. The themes that were noted from the interviews agreed with identified strengths and advantages of special education programs in rural districts (Gross & Opalka, 2020; Curtin et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2018).

The communication theme was highlighted because of the ongoing district support, professional development, social media communication, and tele/video conferencing with students and caregivers that were initiated by CISD. At the very beginning of the school closures, CISD held meetings that included central office leaders, special education leaders, school administrative teams, and community leaders. The Assistant Superintendent collaborated with district principals and had direct communication with instructors. The Texas Education Agency mailed learning packets to student homes, but the logistics around returning the packets

were challenging. Once the packets were received, they could not be touched for the first 48 hours. Drop-off locations and times had to be established, and teachers then had to grade, which resulted in a large time gap between students receiving teacher feedback. Having delayed teacher responses was difficult for students with behavioral, learning, and emotional disabilities who would be positively impacted from recurring feedback. CISD addressed this issue early on by establishing a constant line of communication. Special education teachers contacted the families of every special needs student. CISD implemented ClassDojo to reach more families with mass communications because the ClassDojo communication platform offered users access via laptop and mobile devices, allowing for simultaneous communication to teachers, students, and caregivers. Logs were created to document teachers' communications with caregivers and related service providers (i.e., speech pathologists). The logs tracked the frequency of communication and assisted in the timely dissemination of information to families. CISD enhanced their communication in the subsequent weeks by incorporating personalized communications for individual caregivers to give updates, resources, and to answer questions. Also, special needs students were given individualized materials (Tremmel et al., 2020).

During the second week of school closures, CISD abandoned the learning packets provided by the Texas Education Agency for an online instructional approach. The physical learning packets were limited in that they were not created to be individualized for students' diverse needs. To ensure successful continuation of instruction during the school closure, CISD distributed laptops and hotspots to students. Online instruction allowed educators to create individualized course content and more easily meet individualized education program (IEP) goals. CISD's special education instructors met with the general education teachers of the special needs students, related service providers, and counselors to guarantee course work aligned with

student IEP goals, ensuring that accommodations and modifications were being given to the appropriate students. While students were home during the school closure, IEP meetings were continuing to take place via Zoom and Flipgrid. The legal guardians of the special needs students were given access to counselor and speech pathologists via telesessions. Counselors promoted mental health teletherapy meetings with students, which directly benefited students with behavior intervention plans (BIPs) who were in need of additional support due to the COVID-19 closures. CISD's partnerships with various community partners and community organizations strengthened their communications with families and allowed for successful distribution of food to students' families in need. The local Boys and Girls Club and after-school program shared weekly videos on Facebook to keep families informed of local resources and to provide homework assistance for struggling students (Tremmel et al., 2020).

Teachers were given a 2-day virtual professional development training to prepare them for online instruction. Additional training was available for every teacher to gain the necessary knowledge to efficiently manage Google Classroom and other resources. The Tri County SSA used an open Google Drive to provide teachers with more training opportunities and digital resources. Some of the professional training that teachers received were centered around student trauma due to COVID-19 and re-entry planning for school openings (Tremmel et al., 2020).

CISD proved to be an exceptional rural school district because the district was able to satisfy the annual admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) timeline meetings. CISD's special education staff accomplished IEP amendment meetings, IEP evaluations, deadlines, and progress monitoring of students throughout the duration of the COVID-19 closures. Assignments administered to special needs students met accommodation and modification requirements per the students' IEP, and CISD also monitored students with BIPs throughout the closure. The

district planned to hold meetings with the IEP team to discuss closing any academic gaps created by the school closures upon the return of in-person instruction (Tremmel et al., 2020).

Several lessons were to be learned from CISD's response to COVID-19. CISD leveraged the district's relationships with families and students, created effective partnerships with families and students, maintained productive community partnerships, provided professional development, and successfully disseminated information (Tremmel et al., 2020). The strategies that CISD implemented were strategies with the potential to alleviate academic gaps or disparities between students with and without disabilities. Despite the potential barriers in rural education, such as poverty, lack of internet access, and geographic isolation (Rude & Miller, 2017), CISD successfully maximized the various strengths of the district.

Nusser (2020) sought to explore the learning experience of homeschooling during the COVID-19 school closures for students who were expected to have greater challenges learning autonomously, students with low academic achievement levels, and students possessing special educational needs (SEN). The study compared students with SEN and low academic performance to students who did not belong to either group. Nusser specifically explored parental involvement, learning time, organization of learning, and the challenges associated with school closures. School closures due to the pandemic were assumed to negatively impact special needs and low academic achieving students (Asbury et al., 2020).

Nusser's (2020) sample data utilized for the study were retrieved from the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS). During the pandemic, NEPS invited all parents to participate in an online survey on their circumstances at home during the earlier months of school closures. The number of respondents to the survey was 1,452 (52.25% female and 47.75% males). The number of children who were considered SEN was 4.78% (69 students) and 10.24% (148

students) were students with low academic achievement at the end of primary school in both math and reading.

Hedge's (1981) *g* effect size was used to compare and analyze students with SEN and low academic achieving students with students who were outside of these two subgroups. Stepwise regressions were performed that consisted of family and child characteristics (educational backgrounds of families and gender), grouping variables (low academic achieving students and students with SEN), information pertaining to parental and school support (the parents' abilities to their children's education during closures and parental satisfaction with school support that was offered), and the children's willingness to exert effort in school and parental support for homework (both measured in 4th grade) (Nusser, 2020).

The results of the study depicted students with SEN spent twice as long (35 hours per week) learning during the school closures in comparison to non-SEN students and non-low achieving students. Students with SEN on average received a reported 11 hours of support from their parents or guardians. Students with low academic achievement only spent an average of 9 hours per week with parents providing an average of 7.5 hours of support per week. When parents were asked to rate their ability to academically support their child, the parents of the students with SEN rated their ability slightly higher than those of low achievement students and those whose child was without SEN and low achievement. The parents of students without SEN/low achievement and the parents of children with low achievement, both, were unsatisfied with school and teacher support. The parents of students with SEN gave the highest satisfaction ratings in comparison to the other two groups. Although the parents of students with SEN reported the greatest amount of learning time per week (35 hours), a large portion of these parents reported the learning outcome in main subjects as significantly lower compared to

normal schooling. A little over 30% of the parents of students without SEN or low academic achievement and parents of students with low academic achievement equivalently rated their child's learning outcome to be comparable to regular schooling; however, parents of students with SEN did not report this rating. The parents of low achieving students reported experiencing greater difficulties during the school closures. The researcher's results showed that being a parent of a child with SEN or low academic achievement levels was not directly associated with the number of perceived difficulties during the school closures. The greatest reports of difficulties were significantly impacted the most by two factors: parents' educational background and the gender of the child. Parents who possessed a higher education reported less difficulties during the closures. Parents of males reported more challenges than that of females. Parents who felt well equipped to assist their child with learning at home significantly reported less difficulties with their child's learning during the school closures (Nusser, 2020).

Nusser's (2020) study shed light on the experience of German parents and students in secondary school at-home learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures. The study showed that adequate attention should be given to students with less favorable learning environments and family support. The study was limited, in that the sample size of students with SEN was substantially small, which jeopardized differentiated analyses with respect to various areas of SEN. Due to the small sample size of parents with SEN, an increase probability measurement error was present and thus there is uncertainty in study results pertaining to this group.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. The literature review provided a clear background to the study. A brief exploration of the literature depicted studies, such as Martin et al. (2019), whose study showed that the competencies that instructors perceived as most significant in all competency areas differed from the top competencies that faculty believed they could accomplish.

Gay (2016) conducted a study about the online instructor e-learning readiness (e-readiness) before, during, and after course delivery. The results of Gay's (2016) study offered a benchmark that can be used to pinpoint characteristics of online instructors appropriate for the online environment, identifying suitable training needs, and assessing online instructors' aptitude for online instruction prior to being assigned an online course to teach. Additional studies, like the study completed on CISD, explored the successes and lessons learned from this rural school district during the transition to virtual instruction to offer direction to school districts as they were navigating the obstacles associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nusser (2020) sought to explore the learning experience of German homeschooling during the COVID-19 school closures for students who were expected to have greater challenges learning autonomously, students with low academic achievement levels, and students possessing special educational needs (SEN). The study showed that adequate attention should be given to students with less favorable learning environments and family support.

III. Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Virtual learning was generally defined as the primary delivery of the learning experience through a web-based platform and digital devices (Hung & Wati, 2020).

Description of Research Design

This phenomenological qualitative study utilized virtual interviews of high school SPED teachers to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction had influenced teachers' confidence to instruct their students. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes.

A phenomenological research design was used to capture the meaning and understanding of the special education teachers' lived experience as a virtual instructor. The common phenomenon was that all high school special education teachers were thrust into an online environment as the primary delivery of their instruction to their students from March 2020 to February 2021. The teachers' experience and their perception of their ability to deliver sound instruction in a 100% virtual environment was investigated throughout the study.

In the study, the teachers' differing views of experiencing the phenomenon was reported (Moustakas, 1994). As seen through ontological beliefs, social constructivism was the best fit for

the study because all the teachers had their reality of the phenomenon, delivering SPED services to students solely through online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant presented their unique reality of the phenomenon influenced by their life experiences and social interactions with others.

Participants

The sampling methodology focused on criterion-driven sampling, seeking out high school SPED teachers from several schools within a Tennessee county. The high school SPED teachers selected were employed as instructors during the COVID-19 crisis transition beginning in March 2020 up to February 2021. The study sample size was five participants. A total of 9 high school SPED teachers were contacted via email, with five responding to be participants. The participants included one male and four females. Four respondents represented three public high schools, and one respondent represented a charter school under the school district. The titles of the participants included the following:

- SPED instructor,
- response to intervention, RTI, facilitator,
- SPED education department chair,
- co-teacher.

The high schools that the teachers represented included three optional schools: an award-winning, top 20% best high school in the state; a STEM school; and an engineering optional (magnet) public school. Also, a level-5 reward STEM charter school was included amongst the represented schools.

Role of Researcher

The researcher was experienced with teaching general education courses at the high school level. The researcher's knowledge of the difficulty and challenges that virtual learning presented for teachers and students encouraged the researcher to pursue the study. The focus of the study was on how the transition to virtual instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver SPED services to their students within a school district that had gone 100% virtual due to the pandemic.

Measures for Ethical Protection

The Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave approval before virtual interviews began. Upon acceptance, and before participants were enrolled for the study, participants were asked to give informed consent. The informed consent detailed what was being studied, the method used, who the participants were, the study's benefits, and purpose. All participants received a full transcript of their interview to review for accuracy via email. The verification of each transcript was also completed through email. Participants' identities and their school's names were kept anonymous, and their information remained confidential. All data were stored securely on the researcher's password-protected computer in a locked office.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research question:

How has the transition to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence to instruct their students?

Data Collection

The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a West Tennessee school district that was 100%

virtual from March 2020 to February 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual interviews were completed over the Zoom video conferencing platform. The interviews were recorded through Zoom, and an additional software, Otter.ai, was used by the researcher to record, transcribe, and time-stamp the interviews.

Before the interview, participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured appropriate measures would be taken to maintain ethical guidelines. Teachers were also given an informed consent outlining the potential benefits and harms of the study, assurance of anonymity, and data protection. Five teachers were interviewed regarding their lived experience of teaching virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how virtual instruction had affected high school SPED teachers' confidence in delivering SPED services to students in a 100% virtual environment.

Snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was the sampling method employed for the study. Participating teachers were asked to refer another SPED teacher for the study, and teachers were made aware that a teacher referral was not mandatory. Teachers' relationships were leveraged with other SPED teachers within the school district to identify additional study participants. Identified participants were then recruited via email communication from the researcher.

Procedures

Once IRB approval was granted from Southeastern University, the researcher emailed potential high school SPED teachers requesting their study participation. Teacher emails were received through referrals, while some were accessed using the schools' website faculty directory that is open to the public. The emails sent to prospective participants included the overview and purpose of the study. After receiving the teacher's acceptance, the researcher

emailed an informed consent and a link to schedule a virtual interview to the teachers. The researcher sent a follow-up email to participants that contained the audio recording and transcription of the interview for the teacher's review for validation. Once accuracy was confirmed via an email reply from the participating teacher, the researcher began to code the transcript and identify all of the data's meaningful themes. Once the data were analyzed, the researcher made recommendations and shared findings with participating teachers, the administrators, and the school district.

Data Analysis

Research Question

How has the transition to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence to instruct their students?

The data collected in the study was coded for several themes and a central theme with categories was formed. The analysis of the axial coding resulted in information gathered around causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, and consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Preliminary Analysis

The preliminary analysis of the data began with open coding. The data collected were coded for its major categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data in the study was aggregated and interpreted. When open coding was complete, axial coding was created, which consisted of categories built around the identified core phenomenon.

Data Analysis by Research Questions

The researcher took the information gathered from open and axial coding and presented a coding paradigm through a visual model that identified the central phenomenon, explored causal conditions, specified strategies, identified the context and intervening conditions, and delineated

the consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “Overcoming the barriers of online instruction in abrupt transitions” was the central theme identified from the data analysis. The central theme consisted of three themes: communication, online instruction, and teachers’ ability to adapt. Online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction & barriers to online instruction.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers’ confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. This phenomenological qualitative study utilized virtual interviews of high school SPED teachers to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction had influenced teachers' confidence to instruct their students. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a Tennessee school district that was 100% virtual from March 2020 to February 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher’s sampling methodology focused on criterion-driven sampling, seeking out high school SPED teachers from several schools within a Tennessee county.

The data collected in the study was coded for several themes and a central theme with categories was formed. The analysis of the axial coding resulted in information gathered around causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, and consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The preliminary analysis of the data began with open coding. The data collected were coded for its major categories of information. The data collected was aggregated and interpreted. When open coding was complete, axial coding was done, which consisted of categories created around

the identified core phenomenon. The information gathered from open and axial coding was used to present a coding paradigm through a visual model that identified the central phenomenon, explored causal conditions, specified strategies, identified the context and intervening conditions, and delineated the consequences.

IV. Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Virtual learning was generally defined as the primary delivery of the learning experience through a web-based platform and digital devices (Hung & Wati, 2020).

Methods of Data Collection

The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a West Tennessee school district that was 100% virtual from March 2020 to February 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual interviews were completed over the Zoom video conferencing platform. The interviews were recorded through Zoom, and an additional software, Otter.ai, was used by the researcher to record, transcribe, and time-stamp the interviews.

Participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured appropriate measures would be taken to maintain ethical guidelines before the interview. Teachers were also given an informed consent outlining the potential benefits and harms of the study, assurance of anonymity, and data protection. Five teachers were interviewed regarding their lived experience of teaching virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how virtual instruction had affected high

school SPED teachers' confidence in delivering SPED services to students in a 100% virtual environment.

Snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was the sampling method employed for the study. Participating teachers were asked to refer another SPED teacher for the study, and teachers were made aware that a teacher referral was not mandatory. Teachers' relationships were leveraged with other SPED teachers within the school district to identify additional study participants. Identified participants were then recruited via email communication from the researcher.

Findings by Research Question

"Overcoming the barriers of online instruction in abrupt transitions" was the central theme identified from the data analysis. The central theme consisted of three themes: communication, online instruction, and teachers' ability to adapt. Online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction.

Research Question

How has the transition to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence to instruct their students?

Themes

Theme 1: Communication

Communication was the first major theme developed in the study. The communication theme consisted of two codes: teacher-to-student communication suggestions and teacher-to-parent communication suggestions. Categories from the theme included caring communication with students and building relational equity with students.

The theme emerged from three out of the five teachers interviewed. All interviewed teachers stated some difficulty or barrier in online instruction compared to in-person instruction. However, the theme of communication surfaced as a key to staying connected with students and parents while face-to-face interactions were lacking. Teacher 1 stated, "You got to show them that you care. Build relationships; build bonds. Build that bond, have small talks." Teacher 1 expressed the importance of remaining relational in a virtual setting. Emphasis on relational equity while providing services to students was also seen in another statement made by Teacher 1, "I would say show more care because we never know what the babies are going through if we see it is hard for us. So just imagine what they're going through… care for the students."

Teacher 5 stated, "One thing I think is very important is that there always has to be communication between the student and the teacher". Teacher 5 deemed constant teacher-to-student communication would benefit both the teacher and the student in ensuring that students' needs are being met. The importance of teacher-to-parent communication was also highly esteemed by Teacher 5. Teacher 5 voiced, "If there are issues and concerns, you have to contact the parent and say whatever the issue or concern is." Teacher 5 expressed confidence in communicating to parents in her statement, "I would feel very comfortable in contacting the parent and saying whatever the issue or concern was in regards to the student because we're all trying to do what's in the best interest of the student." The teachers who expressed this theme displayed that communication between teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent was where personal ownership or control could be present. In giving online instruction, Teacher 4 mentioned administering grace in the communication of assignment expectations:

> "So, I think that extending grace, if it were to happen again, would be one of the biggest lessons that I would have. And I think that that would transition well into the practices in my classroom of assignment deadlines and supplemental material."

Theme 2: Online Instruction

The second major theme developed from the teacher data gathered in the study was online instruction. The major theme of online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction. The codes that aligned with the perceptions of online instruction subtheme included perception of the transition from in-person to online (unfavorable) and perceptions of the transition from in-person to online (good). The subtheme, barriers to online instruction, contained three codes that aligned with the theme: teacher experience in online instruction or teacher readiness, barriers that contributed to a perceived difficult transition, and impact on students. The online instruction theme displayed 22 categories formed from the codes.

The unfavorable perceptions of teachers' transition from in-person to online were expressed as being complicated and frustrating, lack of resources and funds, negative effects on student engagement, abrupt transition with no time to prepare, initial lack of direction and guidance from the district, and shifting expectations and confusion. Specifically, Teacher 1 stated, "It was a hard transition." Teacher 1 turned a room at home into her office or classroom for virtual instruction and, in having to do so, stated, "I didn't have everything that I needed because who would have thought that I was going to need funds to make this basically a classroom." The transition to virtual instruction negatively impacted perceived student engagement. Teacher 2 stated, "I thought the virtual environment exacerbated the short attention span." Teacher 3 also expressed the difficulty of the transition in her statement, "It was just really

hard. And like looking back, it is still pretty hard. It was just survival mode for all of us." The transition to online instruction was an abrupt transition with no explicit warnings. Teacher 3 stated, "The transition was just like a cutoff. It was like one day we were in school, and then the next day they were like Spring Break is starting early, and then from there, it just kept going." Teacher 3 also stated how the transition impacted her confidence, "It didn't so much affect my confidence in the beginning like at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, but as the 2021 school year dragged on, it just became really difficult." Teacher 4 expressed the transition as "pretty abrupt" and "rough in the beginning." The difficulties of delivering the same caliber of services and instruction to special education students emerged more with Teacher 4. Teacher 4 felt like SPED teachers were left to figure out how to cope with the transition and still deliver what was expected from the district, "It was very challenging to try to kind of figure that out on our own." Teacher 4 shared, "It probably took us a little bit longer than general education teachers to figure out how we were going to push ourselves in the classes and what our new roles are going to be online." Initially, the district and schools lacked succinct directions to explicitly guide SPED teachers in the transition, as Teacher 4 stated, "… but in that moment when it was kind of foggy and smokey it was very intimidating because we weren't really getting a lot of direction from people of what was right versus what was wrong or what the best way to go about situations were." Teacher 5 also stated how virtual instruction added an extra level of difficulty over in-person instruction, "The virtual limited a person. I feel that I'm more effective in person, but I tried to do the best that I knew to do when I had to be virtual."

Some positive feedback emerged from the transition to virtual instruction. Teacher 2 stated, "It was probably the easiest academic year [2020-2021] ever when we went virtual." Teacher 2 was the most confident and comfortable in the transition to the virtual environment.

He said, “I actually loved being able to be virtual. I was effective in the virtual environment”. Teacher 2 expressed that the SPED instructors at his school were able to effectively provide the SPED students with the services that they needed, “As far as the services being provided, we had less issues during the virtual year [2020-2021].” He also expressed that the virtual environment provided him with improved upkeeping of essential student data, “and then once I figured out how to do it, I found it to be much more effective, much more efficient, much easier to have a digital paper trail, and it made my life easier.” The virtual environment also gave teachers more control over behavioral issues and classroom disturbances according to Teacher 2, who stated, “I think all of us in SPED enjoyed being virtual. We didn’t have to deal with all the behavioral stuff in person that we have to run around and deal with day in and day out…you can just mute them.” Teacher 3 shared that teachers began to shift their mindset of forcing online instruction to look like in-person instruction, “Teachers just stopped this fight of like, it has to look the same as it does in school. We have to keep the same rigor; we have to keep the same pace.” According to Teacher 3, the transition forced teachers and students to become more “tech savvy” and how to utilize “read-aloud options”, “highlighting options” and other online tools to support the educational needs of the students. Teacher 4 stated how the transition changed how teachers taught and improved their skills as an educator, “It changed how we approached the classroom 100%, and I think, ultimately, it made us better as educators”.

Several barriers emerged for online instruction. Some of the difficulties included unfamiliar teaching environment, difficulty gauging student comprehension early, teacher burnout, and lack of online teaching experience. Teachers 1 and 2 expressed how being virtual did not affect their confidence in their ability to teach, but several teachers expressed struggles with student engagement and comprehension. Teacher 3 voiced, “It was really hard for us to

gauge whether or not our students were fully understanding what they were getting instructed on." Confidence in effectively serving and educating students was expressed in Teacher 3's statement, "I personally struggled a lot with feeling like I was failing my kids... partially on my own as an educator, but also on the part of the district." Data revealed that teacher burnout was a barrier to online instruction. For example, Teacher 3 stated, "I struggled a lot that year… teacher burnout is a real thing." Teacher experience in the virtual environment was another barrier that emerged from the data. A lack of experience in the virtual setting affected confidence in ensuring quality education for SPED students, similar to in-person instruction. In referencing teaching in the virtual environment, Teacher 5 stated, "I did not have any experience working in that capacity with students." Several teachers expressed that the online environment did not negatively affect their teaching ability, but their confidence was impacted by the ability to provide student engagement and ensure student comprehension and needs were being met.

The data indicated other barriers that contributed to the perceived difficult transition from in-person instruction to virtual instruction. Interviews with teachers revealed a loss in the instructional time allotted for each class period across the district. Teachers expressed difficulty in implementing pull-outs, and their process of creating their system for conducting student pull-outs in the virtual learning environment. Teachers disclosed their concerns in ensuring special needs students were learning in the virtual setting. The district's slow roll-out of the learning management system, Microsoft Teams, contributed to the initial complications of transitioning to the virtual learning environment. The district was also slack in distributing laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to students. Teachers voiced difficulty in holding students accountable, student attendance, and students in grief. Moreover, teachers expressed a lack of guidance from the district on completing SPED-specific documentation, and pivoting the

delivery of interventions as barriers that contributed to a perceived difficult transition to online instruction. Teachers also faced challenges in remaining organized in the same manner as when in person. Teacher 1 stated, "I was more organized in the class than what I was at home." In referencing the difficulty of doing student pull-outs in the virtual environment in comparison to in-person, Teacher 1 explicitly expressed:

> "At this point, I can't speak out in the class because then I'm singling them out because I have 27 kids in an English II classroom. But then only four of them are SPED. So, I can't say, 'Hey! student A, student B, student C, and student D come to meet.' So, I more so had to reach out to teachers."

Teacher 2 made a statement that outlined the district-level factors that negatively contributed to the transition:

> "When we transitioned to virtual, the struggle was the implementation by the district of Microsoft Teams and all the issues we had. You know, just the issues [the district] has sometimes with rolling out stuff, there were some issues there. The challenge was that a lot of kids, let's say, didn't pick up their laptops, and a lot of kids didn't have Wi-Fi. They didn't have internet at home."

Teacher 2 mentioned students sleeping and skipping instead of being in class and how older teachers were retiring because of the pressure of the transition:

> "So, they [other older teachers that retired or left] were frustrated and did not like the virtual environment or the transition into it, but they're old school teachers. They've been doing their things for decades. So problem was just the kids just did not want to log in or stay log and a lot of virtual skipping a ridiculous amount of virtual skipping."

Teacher 3 discussed the challenges of keeping up with district deadlines for SPED documents with minimum guidance:

> "We had no guidance, very little guidance. And then, toward the end of the year, there was all this pressure to get these IEPs done by the end of the year but no guidance on rules or establishments or procedures to hold things virtually. I mean, they [the district] tried, but then they would give us like a week's time to get all of this done."

Teacher 4 made a similar statement in her interview as well:

> "And then for special education specifically, we got told after about a week to two weeks, 'Hey, any IEPs that you have left for this school year are going to have to be done,' and we really didn't get any training on how to do them or how we were going to hold them virtually."

Teacher 4 shared that the special education community did not receive the needed support for the transition and that she "didn't really feel that prepared."

The last category of barriers that emerged in the data was focused on how the transition impacted students. Teachers shared how their students' grades, attendance, motivation to do work, and engagement were low. Students' struggles at home, home distractions, and family impact by COVID-19 also surfaced as barriers in online instruction. The students also found low social interactions with peers challenging to cope with, according to Teacher 4, who stated:

> "A lot of my students were in the same boat that I was in. They were struggling with the transition, too, struggling with being in a house all day and not being able to see their friends too and not socially interacting with other people, and having to take care of their families. Some had to be headmen and women of the household and be a parent to younger students."

Teacher 3 explicitly stated the emotional struggles that students endured during the pandemic school closures in her statement:

> "We have a lot of kids that are going through some very serious things, and home life is not great. So, it just was discouraging day in and day out. You could hear the chaos, the pandemonium that's going on behind them, or you wouldn't hear from them at all. So, then you'd be wondering, is everything okay? We had a lot of kids that lost family members or that had family members go into the hospital, and that was sad."

Theme 3: Teachers' Ability to Adapt

The third major theme was teachers' ability to adapt. The theme was comprised of four codes that aligned with the theme: teacher strategies and solutions for dealing with online instruction, solutions, and changes in retrospect desired by the teacher; attempts to close knowledge gaps due to online instruction; and suggestions for teacher readiness to effectively transition to virtual instruction.

The strategies and suggestions that emerged in the data within the theme included readjusting the time allotted for services, the creation of virtual stations via classroom breakout sessions to deliver SPED services, and utilizing the channel feature of Microsoft Teams for student pull-outs. They also thought it advantageous to address student discrepancies in their lack of engagement head-on, break online instruction into segments of instructional time, and after school tutoring. Teachers also suggested future efforts in improving time management, cultivating a better work-life-balance, and giving students more options in the method in which an assignment is completed. Also suggested was utilizing other colleagues for support, taking a more proactive role in their education on online platforms, and becoming a summer-school teacher to help close the learning gap created by the pandemic school closures.

Teacher 1 stated how she had to adjust to the shortened amount of class time allotted by being in the virtual classroom, “I had to [weigh] out my time because even my times changed.” Teacher 1 also shared her strategy for delivering pull-out services for students in the virtual environment. She utilized the learning management system features, Microsoft Teams, “I more so set it up in stations with classroom breakout sessions.” Teacher 2 articulated his approach in his statement:

> Once I learned how to share a screen and to invite them [students] into another classroom or channel, I could just go into all these classes of the primary teachers and go in and just say, “Hey, I’m going to pull you, you; you in this order.

Teacher 4 also stated how she delivered services to her students in the virtual environment and offered additional academic support for students:

> And really having to home in on parent contact and multiple days of tutoring after school and small group instruction, which meant the online pulling of the kids out of the main channel on Teams into a separate channel. So, we really had to be knowledgeable about what we were instructing.

All teachers interviewed offered either a solution or strategy that they implemented or would suggest to other teachers to implement to be successful in online instruction. Utilizing additional platforms to enhance student engagement and comprehension, such as Flipgrid, Kahoot, and Quizlet, was stated by Teacher 3. Teacher 2 suggested breaking down virtual instruction into “five 10 minutes segments,” and Teacher 3 mentioned practicing better time-management as an educator for personal care, “I would for my personal self, set stricter office hours and turn off the screen, turn off the computer.” Teacher 4 stated she would allow “students to have different platforms” for each of her assignments to differentiate instruction.

Evidence of Quality

Creswell (2013) provided several evaluation standards for a phenomenological qualitative approach. Creswell expressed that a phenomenological study should be evaluated by how clearly and concisely the "phenomenon" was articulated, the administration of the appropriate and recommended procedures for data analysis, the communication of the participants' overall experience within context, and the presence of reflexivity throughout the study. A phenomenological research design was used to capture the meaning and understanding of the special education teachers' lived experiences as virtual instructors. The common phenomenon was that all high school special education teachers were thrust into an online environment as the primary delivery of their instruction to their students from March 2020 to February 2021. The teachers' experience and their perception of their ability to deliver sound instruction in a 100% virtual environment were investigated throughout the study. This study utilized the interpretive framework of social constructivism. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), research conducted within a social constructivism framework aims to understand the participants' world in which they live and work. The researcher acknowledged that background could shape interpretation, and the researcher was committed to interpreting participants' constructions of meaning in their reality. The researcher took the information gathered from open and axial coding and presented a coding paradigm through a visual model that identified the central phenomenon, explored causal conditions, specified strategies, identified the context and intervening conditions, and delineated the consequences. The qualifiers used to determine the participants included teachers who were high school special education teachers, who taught virtually during March 2020 – February 2021, and were located in Tennessee. The data analyzed in this section were collected from SPED instructors who met all of the desired qualifiers. Each

participant, for accuracy, verified the transcripts from each virtual interview. All transcripts were verified, and the data extracted from the transcripts accurately represented the participants' responses. All participants answered the same five questions, and the questions adequately measured the construct of interest related to the research question.

Summary

"Overcoming the barriers of online instruction in abrupt transitions" was the central theme identified from the data analysis. The central theme consisted of three themes: communication, online instruction, and teachers' ability to adapt. Online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction.

Communication was the first major theme developed in the study. The communication theme consisted of two codes that aligned: teacher-to-student communication suggestions and teacher-to-parent communication suggestions. The second major theme developed from the teacher data gathered in the study was online instruction. The theme of online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction. The codes that aligned with the perceptions of online instruction subtheme included perception of the transition from in person to online (unfavorable) and perceptions of the transition from in person to online (good). The third major theme was teachers' ability to adapt. The theme was comprised of four codes that aligned with the theme: teacher strategies and solutions for dealing with online instruction, solutions and changes in retrospect desired by the teacher, attempts to close knowledge gaps due to online instruction, and suggestions for teacher readiness to effectively transition to virtual instruction.

V. Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Virtual learning was generally defined as the primary delivery of the learning experience through a web-based platform and digital devices (Hung & Wati, 2020). This phenomenological qualitative study utilized virtual interviews of high school SPED teachers to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction had influenced teachers' confidence to instruct their students. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a Tennessee school district that was 100% virtual from March 2020 to February 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher's sampling methodology focused on criterion-driven sampling, seeking out high school SPED teachers from several schools within a Tennessee county.

Methods of Data Collection

The data collection for this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted via virtual interviews with high school SPED teachers from a West Tennessee school district that was 100% virtual from March 2020 to February 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual interviews were completed over the Zoom video conferencing platform. The interviews were

recorded through Zoom, and an additional software, Otter.ai, was used by the researcher to record, transcribe, and time-stamp the interviews.

Before the interview, participants were briefed on the study's purpose and assured appropriate measures would be taken to maintain ethical guidelines. Teachers were also given an informed consent outlining the potential benefits and harms of the study, assurance of anonymity, and data protection. Five teachers were interviewed regarding their lived experience of teaching virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how virtual instruction had affected high school SPED teachers' confidence in delivering SPED services to students in a 100% virtual environment.

Snowball sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was the sampling method employed for the study. Participating teachers were asked to refer another SPED teacher for the study, and teachers were made aware that a teacher referral was not mandatory. Teachers' relationships were leveraged with other SPED teachers within the school district to identify additional study participants. Identified participants were then recruited via email communication from the researcher.

Summary of Results

Five high school SPED teachers were interviewed to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction had influenced teachers' confidence in instructing their students. Three salient themes emerged from the data analysis: communication, online instruction, and teachers' ability to adapt. Two subthemes of online instruction were identified: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction.

All interviewed teachers stated some difficulty or barrier in online instruction compared to in-person instruction. Communication was the first theme that emerged from the data analysis.

Several teachers strongly felt that effective communication between teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent was vital, especially in the virtual learning environment. Teachers did not have the power to control the pandemic school closure, but the teachers who expressed this theme displayed that communication between teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent was where personal ownership or control could be present within the phenomenon.

The theme of online instruction was composed of two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction. The majority of the teachers had an overall negative perception of their transition from in-person to virtual instruction. No teacher expressed that the transition impacted their confidence in their teaching abilities, but it did impact their confidence in reaching their students with the content and delivering SPED services. Teachers voiced the transition as being complicated and frustrating. There was a lack of resources and funds for teachers to prepare their homes for online instruction; the transition presented negative effects on student engagement, the abruptness of the transition left minimal time for teachers to adequately prepare, and there was a lack of direction and guidance from the district.

All teachers interviewed shared either a solution or strategy that they implemented or would suggest to other teachers to implement to be successful in the online learning environment. Teachers utilized additional online platforms to enhance student engagement and comprehension. Teachers also suggested future efforts in improving time management, cultivating a better work-life-balance, giving students more options in the method in which an assignment is completed, utilizing other colleagues for support, taking a more proactive role in their education on online platforms, and becoming a summer school teacher to help close the learning gap created by the pandemic school closures.

Discussion by Research Question

The present study examined how transitioning from in-person to virtual instruction affected the confidence of high school SPED teachers in instructing their students. This central question was answered by five high school SPED teachers who taught during the March 2020 to February 2021 pandemic school closure. Data were gathered on the teachers' perception of the pandemic school closure on their confidence to deliver instruction. The teachers' responses to transitioning from in-person to virtual instruction are described in the following sections. The three themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented.

Research Question

How has the transition to 100% virtual teaching due to COVID-19 influenced high school SPED teachers' confidence to instruct their students?

Theme 1: Communication

Three teachers emphasized the importance of teacher-to-parent communication, teacher-to-student communication, and relational equity between teachers and students as being vital to virtual instruction. Teacher 1 shared how teachers must intentionally build a relationship with their students, especially in the virtual learning environment. Teacher 1 also emphasized the need to build relational equity while providing services to students. Teacher 5 expressed constant teacher-to-student communication would benefit both the teacher and the student in ensuring that students' needs are being met. The teachers who expressed this theme considered that communication between teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent was where personal ownership or control could be present.

Theme 2: Online Instruction

The unfavorable perceptions of teachers' transition from in-person to online were expressed as being complicated and frustrating. The frustration came because of lack of resources and funds, negative effects on student engagement, abrupt transition with no time to prepare, initial lack of direction and guidance from the district, and shifting expectations and confusion. However, some positive feedback emerged from the transition to virtual instruction. Teacher 2 stated, "It was probably the easiest academic year [2020-2021] ever when we went virtual." The virtual environment also gave teachers more control over behavioral issues and classroom disturbances, according to Teacher 2, who stated, "I think all of us in SPED enjoyed being virtual. We didn't have to deal with all the behavioral stuff in person that we have to run around and deal with day in and day out…you can just mute them."

Several barriers emerged for online instruction. Some of the difficulties included unfamiliar teaching environment, difficulty gauging student comprehension early, teacher burnout, and lack of online teaching experience. Teachers 1 and 2 expressed how being virtual did not affect their confidence in their ability to teach, but several teachers expressed struggles with student engagement and comprehension.

The data indicated other barriers that contributed to the perceived difficult transition from in-person instruction to virtual instruction. Interviews with teachers revealed a loss in the instructional time allotted for each class period across the district. Teachers expressed difficulty in implementing pull-outs and their process of creating their system for conducting student pull-outs in the virtual learning environment. Teachers disclosed their concerns in ensuring special needs students were learning in the virtual setting. The district's slow roll-out of the learning management system, Microsoft Teams, contributed to the initial complications of

transitioning to the virtual learning environment. The district was also slack in distributing laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to students. Teachers voiced difficulty in holding students accountable, student attendance, and students in grief. Moreover, teachers expressed a lack of guidance from the district on completing SPED-specific documentation and pivoting the delivery of interventions as barriers that contributed to a perceived difficult transition to online instruction.

Theme 3: Teachers' Ability to Adapt

Several strategies and suggestions emerged in the data within the third theme. The strategies and suggestions that emerged in the data within the theme included readjusting the time allotted for services, the creation of virtual stations via classroom breakout sessions to deliver SPED services, and utilizing the channel feature of Microsoft Teams for student pull-outs. It was also suggested the importance of addressing student discrepancies in their lack of engagement head-on, breaking online instruction into segments of instructional time, and after-school tutoring.

All teachers interviewed offered either a solution or strategy that they implemented. or would suggest to other teachers to implement, to be successful in online instruction. Utilizing additional platforms to enhance student engagement and comprehension, such as Flipgrid, Kahoot, and Quizlet, was stated by Teacher 3. Teacher 2 suggested breaking down virtual instruction into "five 10 minutes segments," and Teacher 3 mentioned practicing better time-management as an educator for personal care, "I would for my personal self, set stricter office hours and turn off the screen, turn off the computer." Teacher 4 stated she would allow "students to have different platforms" for each of her assignments to differentiate instruction.

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. One limitation in this study was a limited sample size. The interviewees were all high school teachers, and the research relied on snowball sampling to gather participants. The participants interviewed were limited to teachers who experienced the pandemic school closures in a school district that was 100% virtual from March 2020 to February 2021. Not every school nationwide went 100% virtual during that time period, and not all schools that did go virtual stayed virtual for that length of time. Moreover, data from special education teachers from early elementary and middle school were not collected. Qualitative research is also limited, in that it can be very time consuming, and the interpretation of the data may be subjective, even more so if reflexivity is not present (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Implications for Future Practice

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that was 100% virtual due to COVID-19. Even though this study's sample population was comprised of five high school SPED teachers, the rich qualitative insights into the studied phenomenon obtained from interviewees have implications for school districts, general education teachers, and SPED teachers at the elementary and middle school levels. Thematic findings in this phenomenological study illuminated the heightened importance of teacher-to-student and teacher-to-parent communication in the virtual setting. The results of the data can lead to strategic recommendations for online platforms that offer strong communication capabilities for both student and parent contact.

This study's findings regarding the barriers to online instruction present the need for district leaders and school leaders to provide frequent in-depth training for teachers on any

learning management system that will be rolled out on a district or school level. The pandemic shed light on the digital divide (Hung & Wati, 2020), and the teacher interviews revealed the need for strategic planning in the administration of computers and Wi-Fi hotspots on a district level. The need for teachers to have a streamlined online process for the documentation, delivery, and reporting of special education services emerged from the data. Lastly, the data revealed the need for teachers to have professional development available to them that would be tailored to online teaching strategies, student engagement strategies, online platforms that could be utilized to enhance instruction, and virtual tools that can assist teachers in providing services for students with IEPs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological qualitative study's sampled population of high school SPED teachers provided considerable insight into the studied phenomenon. However, despite the findings generated from the five high school SPED teachers, further research into the impact of the pandemic school closure on SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to their students is needed. Future research using a mixed-methods approach among high school SPED teachers would allow investigators to gather additional qualitative and quantitative data. Also, future phenomenological qualitative studies of SPED teachers could be done on the early childhood and middle school levels. In the quantitative data collection of suggested future studies, a nationwide sampling of SPED teachers could be done to give an understanding of the pandemic school closures impact on SPED teachers' confidence to deliver instruction to their students on a national level.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered education worldwide. The data that this study provided can be utilized to improve the virtual learning experience for teachers and students. Data can also be used to more thoroughly equip schools and school districts to know where and how to fill the gaps of service provided due to virtual learning. This phenomenological qualitative study utilized virtual interviews of high school SPED teachers to determine how transitioning from the traditional classroom to virtual instruction has influenced teachers' confidence to instruct their students. The study's sampling focused on criterion-driven sampling seeking out high school SPED teachers from several schools within a large school district in Tennessee. High school SPED teachers selected were employed as instructors during the COVID-19 crisis transition beginning in March 2020.

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Appendix A

Email Communication

Greetings,

My name is Darius Ellis James, and I am a former Honors Biology and AP Computer Science Principles teacher for Shelby County Schools. Though I am no longer in the classroom, I am still an avid learner. I am currently a doctoral student at Southeastern University's College of Education. As a researcher, I am reaching out to you to ask for your participation in a brief interview about transitioning from in person to virtual learning.

Your identity, school of employment, and all other identifying markers will be kept confidential, and will not be shared with your school, school district, or made public. You will have complete anonymity. I will ask you a series of 5 simple questions as it concerns the transition due to COVID-19.

If you are willing to participate, you can reply to this email, and I will send a follow-up email with a consent form and a request for a day and time that works best for your schedule.

Sincerely,

Darius Ellis James

Southeastern University

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research interview on _____.
You were chosen for the interview because you are a high school special education teacher who taught virtually during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of this interview.

This interview is being conducted by a researcher named Darius James, who is a doctoral student at Southeastern University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this interview is to explore the perceptions of high school SPED teachers' confidence to deliver virtual instruction to students within a school district that is 100% virtual due to COVID-19.

Procedures:
If you agree, you will be asked to participate in an audio recorded Zoom interview, lasting approximately 30 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Interview:
Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the interview. No one at Southeastern University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the interview. If you decide to join the interview now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in The Interview:
There is the minimal risk of psychological stress during this interview. If you feel stressed during the interview, you may stop at any time. Possible benefits of your participation in this research include the following: 1) The data provided from the study can be utilized to improve the virtual learning experience for teachers and students. 2) Districts will be provided data and recommendations to how to improve teacher PD for delivering virtual instruction and increase teacher readiness and confidence.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for participating in this interview.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential, including your identity and school of employment. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this interview project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the interview.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher's name is Darius James. The researcher's principal investigator and dissertation chair is Dr. Charles Smith. You may ask any question you have now or later by contacting Darius James at dejames@seu.edu. If you want to communicate privately about your rights as a participant, you can contact Dr. Janet Deck, the Chair of the Southeastern University Doctoral Program at jldeck@seu.edu.

Southeastern University's IRB contact information:
Email: irb@seu.edu
Address: Institutional Review Board, Southeastern University, 1000 Longfellow Blvd, Lakeland Fl, 33809

Signature of Consent:
By signing this form, you agree to a virtual, 30-mins interview with Darius James on the agreed upon date and time.

_____ _____
Participant's Signature **Date Signed**

Appendix C

Interview Questions

The researcher will ask the participants a series of five interview questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. Tell me about your experience from transitioning from in person to virtual instruction due to COVID-19?
2. How did your instruction change when you transitioned?
3. How did this transition effect your confidence in teaching?
4. If you had to do it all over again, what changes would you implement to be more effective and confident in the virtual environment?
5. What else would you like to contribute to this important research for successful teaching in the virtual environment?

Appendix D

Table 1

Theme 1: *Communication*

Theme	Subthemes	Codes That Align with Theme	Categories From the Codes
Communication		Teacher-to-student communication suggestions	Caring communication with students
			Build relational equity with students
		Teacher-to-parent communication suggestions	Frequent communication with parents and students

Note: The communication theme consisted of two codes that aligned: teacher-to-student communication suggestions and teacher-to-parent communication suggestions.

Appendix E

Table 2

Theme 2: *Online Instruction*

Theme	Subthemes	Codes That Align with Theme	Categories from the Codes
Online Instruction	Perceptions of Online Instruction	Perception of the transition from in person to online (unfavorable)	Difficult and frustrating
			Lacked resources and funds
			Negative effects on student engagement
			Abrupt transition with no time to prepare
			Initial lack of direction and guidance from the district
			Shifting expectations & confusion
		Perception of the transition from in person to online (Good)	Gen Ed teachers gave large amounts of accommodations, which made Having fidelity in services provided easier
			The LMS (Microsoft Teams) was easy to use for some teachers especially after practice and repetition
			Avoidance of direct behavioral issues and more control over disturbances
			Easier to streamline SPED paperwork and data
			Thrusted teachers and students to be more tech savvy
	Barriers to Online Instruction	Teacher experience in online instruction or teacher readiness	Age and willingness to learn a new LMS
			Unfamiliar teaching environment
			Difficulty gauging student comprehension early on
			Communication barrier
			Figuring things out alone
			Teachers' personal internal and external struggles
			Teacher burnout and lack of experience teaching virtually

			Lack of experience teaching virtually

Theme	Subthemes	Codes That Align with Theme	Categories from the Codes
Online Instruction	Barriers to Online Instruction	Barriers that contributed to a perceived difficult transition	Less instructional time for virtual instruction in comparison to in-person
			More difficult to implement "pull-outs"
			Harder to ensure special needs students were learning
			Initial roll out of the LMS by the district
			Initial laptop and Wi-Fi hot spots slowly picked up
			Difficulty holding students accountable
			Lack of guidance from district on completing SPED specific documents
			Struggling student attendance
			Initial ending of instruction during early months of school closures
			Grieving students
			Pivoting the delivery of interventions
			Students needing a slower pace of instruction
			Lack of support and preparation given to SPED teachers by the district
			Lack of physical interactions with students to establish deeper connections
		Impact on students	Limited time for student pull-outs
			Low grades
			Low attendance
			Low motivation to do work
			Low student engagement
			Family impacted by Covid
			Struggles at home and home distractions
			Students found low social interactions with peers difficult to cope

Note: The major theme of online instruction was divided into two subthemes: perceptions of online instruction and barriers to online instruction. The codes that aligned with the perceptions of online instruction subtheme included perception of the transition from in person to online (unfavorable) and perceptions of the transition from in person to online (good).

Appendix F

Table 3

Theme 3: *Teachers' Ability to Adapt*

Theme	Subtheme	Codes That Align with Theme	Categories From the Codes
Teachers' Ability to Adapt		Teacher strategies and solutions for dealing with online instruction	Add new strategies to adapt to the new normal
			Readjust the time allotted for services
			Created virtual stations via classroom breakout sessions to deliver SPED services
			Utilized the channel feature of Microsoft Teams for student pull-outs
			Address student discrepancies in their lack of engagement head on
			Break online instruction into five 10 minutes segments
			Instruction delivered on LMS, Microsoft Teams, as a whole group, small group, and asynchronous days
			Utilized other online tools to support students, such as Flipgrid, Kahoot, and Quizlet
			Frequent parent communication
			After school tutoring
			Small group instruction
			Pulled students out of their main class into separate Microsoft Teams channels
		Solutions and changes in retrospect desired by the teacher	Improve time management
			Physically go to the homes of the SPED students to teach and social distance
			Better work life balance
			Give students more options in the method in which an assignment is completed
			Utilize other colleagues more often for support
			Take a more proactive role in personal education of online platforms
		Suggestions for teacher readiness to effectively transition to virtual instruction	Becoming a summer school teacher
			Prepare well for the virtual platform of use

Note: The theme was comprised of four codes that aligned with the theme: teacher strategies and solutions for dealing with online instruction, solutions and changes in retrospect desired by the

teacher, attempts to close knowledge gaps due to online instruction, and suggestions for teacher readiness to effectively transition to virtual instruction.