Teachers' Perspectives on Distance Learning During COVID-19

Kelly N. Arseneau

Georgia Southern University

EDUR 7090: Applied Research Project in Education

Dr. Cordelia Zinskie

December 09, 2020

Teachers' Perspectives on Distance Learning During COVID-19

Distance learning (also known as online learning, virtual school, or e-learning) offers students of any age an alternative option to the traditional brick and mortar school. Currently there are two options for students looking to enroll in distance learning, these are full-time or a blended model. Students enrolled in a full-time distance education school receive all instruction and assignments online; in contrast, students enrolled in blended model schools complete some course requirements online and some in the classroom with the teacher (Miron et al., 2018). A 2018 report by the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning examined survey results regarding reasons why some students are choosing full-time or blended distance learning over their traditional brick and mortar school. Some of these include academic, social, or emotional issue; illness; or other circumstances preventing them from physically attending school. The report also revealed that one reason parents choose distance learning is the opportunity it presents to take on a larger role in their student's education. Recently, enrollment in distance and blended learning schools has been on the rise in the U.S. Miron et al. (2018) reported, "Enrollments in [distance learning schools] increased by 17,000 students between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and enrollments in [hybrid] learning schools increased by 80,000 during this same time period" (p. 4). Both students and parents choosing distance learning must be motivated to take on more of a lead role in the student's education (Curtis & Werth, 2015).

Distance learning opportunities are a solution for students who are unable to attend traditional brick and mortar schools; however, the roles of students, students' parents, and educators change a great deal in distance learning when compared to these same roles in traditional brick and mortar instruction (Curtis & Weth, 2015). In a 2015 study by Archambault and Larson that sought to learn from educators in the distance learning field, participant

responses illustrated vital characteristics and needs of distance educators that differ from those of traditional brick and mortar educators, such as training and alternatively developed skills in technology, time management, and communication. Communication between distance educators and their students and students' parents has proven to play a big role in students' success (Curtis & Werth, 2015). Therefore, distance learning educators need strategies for using an array of technology to maintain the consistent, timely feedback and motivation that their distance learners and their parents need that go beyond the communication strategies employed by traditional educators. Accordingly, the presence of appropriate training and preparation for distance education in teacher education programs is another frequently cited need of the distance educator. A focus on technology resources and methodology and best practices for the delivery of distance education are not common in teacher education programs; thus, teacher preparation courses have not been sufficient in preparing preservice teachers for jobs in distance learning (Muilenburg & Burge, 2015). Teachers entering the distance learning field require additional training to effectively teach in this setting.

Similarly to the disparities in the role of the educator, there are differences in the role of a distance learner's guardian(s) when compared to the role of a guardian of a brick and mortar student, especially at the primary level. In addition to his/her distance educator, primary students require an adult at home to facilitate the learning process, thus the guardian(s) of a distance learner must be prepared, and willing to be an essential part of the student's instruction and learning (Burdina et al., 2019; The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning, 2018; Miron et al., 2018). Primary students' success and engagement in distance learning education is affected by their access to the educator, at-home facilitator, and distance learning peers (Burdina et al., 2019). Much like primary distance learners, the effects of educator support and parental

involvement at-home on middle and high schoolers have been perceived by their guardians as an important factor in their student's distance learning success (Curtis & Werth, 2015).

In March 2020, school campuses, in parts of America and the world, were required to close in an effort to slow the spread of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19. The closing of schools forced unprepared students, parents, and teachers to make a sudden shift from traditional brick and mortar education to an impromptu, distance learning setting. Twenty-six states closed schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Education Week, 2020). At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 were ongoing; thus, several schools remained closed. The summer break gave school leaders a small window to prepare for the start of the 2020-2021 school year. For the majority, school districts in America tracked the number of COVID-19 cases in their area and made decisions about returning to school in the fall using the guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control (2020). As teachers returned for the 2020-2021 school year, either working from home or on campus, they learned that their school would either be returning to brick and mortar learning, continuing distance learning, or starting a blended learning model. Most schools that decided to continue distance learning, did so with a different plan than the one they had experienced in the spring, when schools were closed unexpectedly.

Schools have emergency plans for probable situations that may occur on or off campus, and those plans are practiced by students, faculty, and staff in the form of drills. Also, information regarding how a school will navigate probable emergency situations is relayed to its stakeholders. Plans of this nature do not include how schools will handle prolonged loss of facilities (Goswick et al., 2018). Crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, are not categorized as probable like a fire at school, and with this improbable crisis, deficiencies in educators' abilities

to serve students via distance learning have come to light (Avgerinou & Moros, 2020). Current research reflects issues with distance learning as perceived by teachers who have chosen to teach in a distance learning setting; the unanticipated onset of COVID-19 has created a novel situation to examine the additional issues educators perceive when they are unprepared for a sudden, unexpected required shift to distance learning (Girelli et al., 2020). Alea et al. (2020) examined teachers' perspectives of teaching distance learning during COVID-19; teachers' responses illustrated agreement amongst participants on the challenges they faced during this time. A lack of training that is needed to conduct distance learning, Learning Management System (LMS) challenges, unstable internet connections, teachers' ability to manage time, stress of meeting administrators' deadlines and expectations with limited time between online meetings, establishing efficient parent communication needed for distance learning, and assessing students' completed work in the LMS or email are several of the shared challenges that the 2,300 participating teachers faced. The authors suggested that a decision be made by schools regarding how they will provide distance learning, and a continuous evaluation of the program is needed to alleviate the challenges that hinder teachers during an unexpected shift to distance learning. Anderson and Hira (2020) reported findings from interviews with six elementary school teachers and their perspectives on teaching during COVID-19. The participants illustrated challenges of the sudden shift to distance learning as a scarcity in individualized help for teachers and resources to support teachers during the transition to distance learning. Furthermore, their report highlighted the change in length of teachers' workday to include evenings, nights and early mornings, due to a significant increase in teacher workload and the need to be available to students and parents at different times of the day. The teachers showed an understanding that being available to students outside of the school day, every day, is not feasible as a long-term

solution. Finally, participants discussed the need to reduce the curriculum content due to the shift to distance learning due to the diminished time teachers can spend with their students and the large increase of time it takes to prepare lessons. Another study by Midcalf and Boatwright (2020) gleaned teachers' perspectives on not knowing whether a student has an overabundance of help on assignments or an insufficient amount of help from family members at home and the struggle this creates in assessing what a student knows based on assignments that are turned in online. Furthermore, teachers described the challenge of lack of student participation on assignments and turning in their work.

There will be other crises that will require teachers to move their instruction online (e.g., natural disasters); therefore, research on this phenomenon serves to gain insight on how to best support and prepare teachers to continue educating during a crisis. This study aimed to learn from the experiences of educators and gather necessary insight, from the source, to guide improvements to preparing educators for required shifts to distance learning during a crisis. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of teachers' perspectives of distance learning during COVID-19. This paper reports the perspectives of teachers at an elementary school in a southeastern state.

Method

Setting

This study was conducted where the researcher is currently teaching, a Montessori elementary school in a southeastern state. For the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality protection, the researcher has assigned the school a pseudonym, Montessori Elementary School and is keeping the school's district undisclosed. Information for this study was collected in the fall of 2020 from teachers educating their students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Montessori

Elementary School's district has 24 elementary schools, seven K-8 schools, eight middle schools, and eleven high schools. At the start of the study campuses were closed districtwide in an effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. This district's teachers and students are employing distance learning in lieu of the traditional brick and mortar education to which they were accustomed.

Researcher Role

For this study, the researcher took on the role of an outsider attempting to gain a better understanding of teachers' perspectives of distance learning during COVID-19. Though the participants and the researcher teach at the same school, the researcher is not in a position of power over participants. The participants and the researcher did not conduct identical distance learning activities and had dissimilar lived experiences, thus the role of outsider simply seeking to understand their lived experiences is a reasonable one. The participants may see the researcher as an insider given, they teach at the same school and they have the same superiors; therefore, they may be more open to giving complete and honest accounts of their experience, opposed to a stranger who has no affiliation to the school.

Participants

This study collected information from teachers currently employed at Montessori Elementary School during the fall of 2020. This school employs three kindergarten teachers, six lower elementary teachers, and three upper elementary teachers. The researcher used purposeful sampling to include one teacher from upper elementary, one teacher from kindergarten, and one teacher from lower elementary to allow for a representative sample of the population. The researcher recruited participants by sending an email asking them to take part in an anonymous interview as part of a study on teachers' perspectives of distance learning during COVID-19. To

protect participants' anonymity, the researcher used pseudonyms selected by the participants. Teachers at Montessori Elementary school were employing the same distance learning platform as the other elementary teachers in this district.

Instrument

An interview guide created by the researcher and adapted from "Interview Guide RTL Example," (Kennedy, 2001) was used to gather participants' experiences (see Appendix A). Interview guide questions were developed based on alignment to the research questions and the researcher's thorough literature review of distance learning and teachers' perspectives on distance learning. The questions were reviewed by the course instructor and necessary edits were made by the researcher to attempt content validity. A semi-structured interview guide was created to ensure the researcher gathered similar information, relevant to the research question, from all participants, to keep the interview topic-focused, and to provide the researcher with probes when more information and/or clarification was needed from a participant (Jamshed, 2014). Demographic information is included in the beginning of the interview but is kept somewhat vague to protect anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Procedures

Due to the nature of this study, a qualitative research approach was used to gather and analyze data. Semi-structured interviews (Roberts, 2020) were conducted to gain insight on teachers' perspectives of distance learning during COVID-19. The researcher used a qualitative data analysis coding procedure to analyze the interview transcripts first for categories, then for themes amidst those categories.

Because this study was conducted as a class project, no individual permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was required. Upon approval from the course instructor, the

researcher contacted the director of Montessori Elementary School, where the researcher was employed, and was granted permission to email teachers at Montessori Elementary School to gain participant consent. Three teachers agreed to participate in the study by completing an anonymous interview with the researcher to share their perspectives of distance learning during COVID-19. Prior to interviews, participants read and signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B); participants received a copy of their signed informed consent form.

For security and protection of confidentiality and anonymity, all transcripts, notes, and consents and any additional physical papers related to the study were kept in the researcher's locked filing cabinet, only accessible to her. All digital materials, including, but not limited to, interview audio, transcripts, and notes were only saved on a password protected USB drive; this was also secured in the researcher's locked filing cabinet when not in use by the researcher. Furthermore, the interview only asked participants demographical information and participants provided pseudonyms that were only known to the researcher and the participant; pseudonyms were the only identifiers used by the researcher. To maintain accuracy of information, transcripts were sent to each participant for review and approval of the content. Each participant reviewed her transcript and provided the researcher approval of the accuracy of it.

Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom, a virtual meeting application. Using Zoom allowed for flexible meeting times, while practicing social distancing, a safety precaution currently being employed to prevent spreading a COVID-19. Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed to allow for qualitative data analysis. All participants were asked a series of topic questions from the interview guide. Because the researcher used a semi-structured interview approach, each interview varied slightly due to situational use of predeveloped probes contained in the interview guide. The researcher used various predeveloped probes when clarification or

more details were needed. Following each interview, the researcher replayed the audio of the interview and wrote notes as a first evaluation of the data, and to aid with later identification of categories and themes within the responses.

Results

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of teachers' perspectives on distance learning during COVID-19. Findings from interviews of three elementary school teachers tell their stories of their experience conducting distance learning during COVID-19. Analysis of the interview transcripts produced the following overarching themes: (1) lack of preparedness, (2) increase to teacher workload, (3) failures of administration, (4) student success factors, and (5) decrease in teachers' sense of self-efficacy.

Emerging Themes

Lack of preparedness and inadequate training. The first theme that emerged was the teachers' perception that the training for distance learning and preparation they experienced did not provide them with any sense of preparedness as they began their school year teaching distance learning during COVID-19. The three participants were asked to explain their experience in preparing for distance learning and their perceived sense of preparedness to conduct distance learning at the start of the schoolyear. All three participants stated that they were required to take part in two, one-hour formal training sessions about the Learning Management System (LMS) they would be using for distance learning. Each participant explained that the training was conducted via a video conferencing platform and 500 teachers from across their state attended both training sessions. All three teachers described the training as "boring," adding that it covered a great deal of content, too quickly, making it difficult to learn or retain the information being provided. Specifically, Rae explained that, "[The training] wasn't

beneficial at all because it just was too rushed and there was way too much information given to me at one time; I just felt overwhelmed." The three participants also shared in their perception that they needed more time to prepare their distance learning material prior to students' start date. Emma's perception was, "Honestly…I felt like I was wandering through the dark with my hands out…We needed more time to explore, collaborate, and set-up before kids started." Each participant's perception of their preparedness was parallel to the others', in that, they did not feel that the training and the amount of time they were given to prepare were adequate, which led them to feel that they were not prepared to conduct distance learning prior to their students' start date.

Increased workload for teachers. Participants were asked to explain how their workload has changed as a distance learning teacher during COVID-19, when compared to previous years. The three teachers shared in their perception that their workload has increased significantly, and they are working well beyond the hours of their typical workday, in addition to working every weekend. They indicated that they were not able to complete everything that was expected of them and shared feelings of being overwhelmed by the increased workload brought on by distance learning. Preparing lessons, creating digital materials for students to use, grading assignments, live video conference lessons, increases in time spent conferencing with parents and students, and administrative duties, such as email and committee work were some of the tasks described by the participants. The following statements made by the participants glean the subthemes that emerged from their perceptions of the increased workload: (1) preparing lessons and materials, (2) grading assignments, and (3) overwhelming hours.

Preparing lessons and materials

Each participant acknowledged that the amount of time it takes to prepare their lessons and materials for distance learning far surpasses the amount of time it takes to do these tasks when teaching in the brick and mortar setting to which they are accustomed. Each of them mentioned that prior to COVID-19 students' learning materials were in their classroom, thus they did not have to create them. Also, they were adequately trained on how to present them, and check for students' understanding of the concepts for which the materials were created. The separation of student and teacher created by the distance learning setting added a great deal of challenge for the participants during their lesson planning and creation. Specifically, Ellie stated,

> Before COVID-19, all of the hands-on materials were right there in the classroom, now you have to first create digital versions of them to upload to the platform, make sure what you've uploaded will work properly, and be sure the students and parents know how to use [the materials].

The three teachers felt that creating and/or locating materials and resources to provide to their distance learners is more challenging because a distance learning educator cannot be synchronous with each student as they complete their assignments online and this adds to the difficulty of creating or locating materials that their students could use asynchronously.

Grading Assignments

Ellie and Emma, lower elementary teachers, found it difficult to keep up with grading their students' completed assignments on their distance learning platform. Rae, an upper elementary teacher, did not mention this as a challenge for her; however, the dissimilar format of her older students' assignments when compared to the lower elementary assignments, likely explains the difference in perceptions of this. Rae mentioned using Google Forms for her

students' assignments, and, after familiarizing herself with Google Forms, found it easier to maintain, in contrast to the lower elementary teachers' PowerPoint format wherein students manipulate the digital materials, contained within the slides, to form their answers. The lower elementary assignments require more time to grade than the upper elementary assignments. In addition, all three teachers mentioned that in the brick and mortar setting they were able to assess students' work during the school day, and provide verbal feedback to students as they completed their work, whereas distance learning assignments have to be assessed when teachers have time, and all grading and feedback must be typed or voice recorded. Emma stated, "That's also a big thing…assessing students' [online] work when really, that would be happening [during the school day], you could just check their work right…and give them verbal feedback right away…" The participants, especially the lower elementary teachers, perceived grading distance learning assignments as more time consuming when compared to brick and mortar and indicated that they were unable to keep up with the amount of assignments that needed to be graded.

Overwhelming hours

All three teachers expressed having to work extra hours every day to keep up with the demands of distance learning. While Emma and Ellie expressed their perception of the overwhelming hours more often during the interview, Rae did mention that it has been difficult at times, for her to manage her work and home life with the increased hours she has had to work as a distance learning educator. Ellie's responses showed that her desire to fulfil the expectations of her administration was the main factor for her increased work hours. Specifically, Ellie stated,

> I was doing [my] best…to do everything [administration] required of me and it took me an extra five hours after work every day and working all weekend. I wasn't eating properly; I wasn't sleeping properly… I wasn't doing anything at all outside of working.

While all three participants acknowledged that their work hours have noticeably increased when compared to previous years, Ellie's mentions of increased work hours markedly surpassed the other participants. When discussing the amount of time they spend working each day, Emma and Rae's responses showed little emphasis placed on their perception of what their administration expects of them, and more on what they expect of themselves as educators regarding how much time they spend working. Emma shared, "There were times, in previous years where you got to go home and you would have to do some [work] at home, but now it's become, totally all I do all the time." Each of the participants expressed that meeting the expectations of a distance learning educator could not be met within their regular work hours, whether the expectations were perceived internally or externally.

Student success factors. Participants were asked to share about some of the challenges they faced as they started the school year while transitioning to distance learning during COVID-19. All three participants perceived factors that relate to their students' success, such as (1) family involvement and (2) supporting their students' learning, as major challenges to distance learning.

Family involvement

One challenge the participants faced during distance learning was having adequate participation from their students' adult family members. They all acknowledged that parents must be a part of the distance learning process because the distance learning setting does not allow for teachers to have the same role in students' learning when compared to the brick and mortar setting. While all three teachers expressed dissatisfaction in how their role as a teacher has changed during COVID-19 distance learning, because they are unable to support their students the way they always have. They also expressed how this circumstance also requires a

shift in the roles of their students' families; otherwise, a majority of their students will struggle to succeed. Rae explained it in this way,

> I am a mother of four, so I understand it can be tough for parents, I have to check [my children's] PowerSchool, [and] their learning platforms; but it's necessary right now to make sure your child is successful. Because I, the teacher, can't be the one that's with them doing it, like I would have done before COVID-19; [distance learners] need their parents' involvement to be successful.

Consistently, the participants felt dissatisfied with being forced to place some of the responsibilities of teaching on their students' families; they also acknowledged because that the current global crisis has required this shift, they feel a responsibility to their students to find any way possible to create a partnership with their students' families, but in some cases that has been a struggle. More specifically, all three participants expressed difficulty in acquiring adequate communication with some family members. Ellie explained it as,

> I've been talking to… my [students'] parents, but then a lot of parents…won't respond or anything… I'm planning on doing more to get them involved, because that's what is needed for my students to succeed, but I don't know, is it practical [to ask] parents to do more in this current time?

Collectively the participants felt discouraged by the inability to communicate and lack of partnership with parents that they felt was necessary to help their distance learning students. The participants indicated that students needed an adult at home to help distance learners submit assignments, troubleshoot internet issues, be on time and/or login to live lessons, login and/or navigate the LMS, and motivate distance learners. All three teachers mentioned how the distance

learning setting is also new for students, and since teachers are not able to be with students geographically, parents had to take on the responsibility of helping students.

Supporting students' learning

As previously mentioned, all three participants perceived a challenge in their ability to support their students' learning during distance learning. They expressed that they did not know how to work around the lack of face-to-face time they experience in distance learning. Their responses showed that their lack of experience in distance learning birthed this challenge, and in the brick and mortar setting, supporting their students in work completion was not a challenge they faced, specifically, Rae stated,

> "We're spending a [lot] of time trying to teach students what they need to know to complete work, and then there's some that are just not completing anything. When I'm in the classroom with my students I can set expectations for work completion and I'm there with them all day to facilitate completion of tasks; now [during distance learning] I say all the things I would say in the classroom, but I cannot control what happens when Zoom turns off."

The participants also shared in their perception that they are not able to teach as much content in the distance learning setting, as they would in previous years, as brick and mortar teachers. Emma realized that to serve her students she needed to adjust the curriculum and develop a more focused structure, by eliminating some things she would normally teach and focus on what students need for the next grade, "I've had to realize that the teaching and learning is going so much slower this year, but [if] I can get my students ready for first grade, then I'm good." Mutually, the teachers expressed that spending time teaching students how to navigate the

LMS, specifically, showing students the multiple steps involved in accessing, completing, and submitting distance learning assignments took away from the time that could be spent teaching the curriculum.

Failures of administration. The participants were asked to describe the support they have received from their administration during their transition to COVID-19 distance learning. The theme of the failures of administration also emerged when participants were asked to describe their feelings on how prepared they felt to teach distance learning, describing their change in workload, and the challenges they have faced as distance learning teachers during COVID-19. The following statements from the participants illustrate the subthemes that emerged within this theme failures related to (1) teacher preparedness, (2) parent preparedness, (3) effective teacher support, (4) attempt to alleviate teachers' workload, and (5) considerations for teachers' workload.

Failures related to teacher preparedness

All three participants felt that administration had failed to prepare them for distance learning. They all also acknowledged that their administration was new distance learning and thought that the administration, themselves, should have had better preparation for distance learning. Rae expressed being "self-sufficient," and acknowledged that she "is not someone who reaches out for help from administration," thus, she perceived the training they offered as a failure, but did not perceive a lack of help from administration. Ellie and Emma on the other hand, felt that administration failed to answer questions and provide guidance on distance learning. Emma stated, "…it would've really helped me if my administration would've been able to answer my questions about how to utilize the platform and provide more guidance on how to structure our curriculum online." Ellie thought that there may not have been so many

unanswered questions, "…if we had some teachers in on the [distance learning] planning process." She felt that teachers should have been included on the decisions and planning that went into developing the distance learning for the new school year, because teachers have valuable input.

There was a general dissatisfaction perceived by the participants with the lack of guidance on how to conduct and structure their classes on the LMS. While the teachers all mentioned that they appreciate the autonomy their school has always, and continues to provide, they felt that during COVID-19 distance learning they needed more guidance and resources. Specifically, Rae stated, "We needed [administration] to help with viable resources or more guidance on resources we could use with our students in the platform." They all perceived that the only guidance they received from their administration was a document that included, among other technical aspects of distance learning, how many lessons and assignments they were required to produce each week. Ellie felt that this guidance was lacking in this way, "Their approach lacked human connection that considered the teachers' capabilities, input, or well-being."

When asked what they would change about the way in which administration helped them prepare for distance learning, they all mentioned better training, adequate resources, and guidance on how to transfer their curriculum from brick and mortar to distance learning. Aside from these shared perceptions, Ellie expressed, more than once, that teachers should have been better prepared mentally and physically, for the transition to distance learning, stating that, "Professional development courses on time and stress management and self-care [for distance learning teachers] is something that should've been put in place to prepare us mentally and physically for what we were going in to." All three participants showed empathy towards their

administration by acknowledging their perceptions that administration was not prepared for the transistion to distance learning, and by stating that they understood novelty of the situation for their administration; however, overall, the teachers' perceptions of their administration's efforts to prepare and support them towards feeling a sense of preparedness for distance learning did not align to what they felt they needed.

Failures related to parent preparedness

When asked about the distance learning preparation that was provided to parents at their school, all three participants indicated that if their administration had provided any preparation to parents, it was insufficient. They all expressed that individual teachers were expected to instruct parents about the aspects of distance learning; however, they felt that they were not knowledgeable enough to prepare parents and they felt that some things would be better coming from administration. Specifically, Rae stated,

> "As a teacher you always work to meet the expectations of a teacher, like helping students be successful in your classroom. …[this year] my teaching role is completely different, but it seems like parents and administration [don't understand] this, and maybe if administration had given parents some guidance or structure regarding the changes to their role in their child's education, and [distance learning] information that parents needed in the beginning, that would have really helped all of us."

The participants felt that administration should have been more knowledgeable of how parents' roles differ in distance learning, and the necessary support, guidance, and information about these changes should come from administration as well. All of the participants felt that this would have helped the teachers, parents, and students during the transition to distance learning.

Failures regarding effective teacher support

Two participants shared the perception that they were required to go to administration whenever they needed help; however, they did not feel they had the time, nor the capacity to reach out every time they needed help. Their responses showed that they felt that they needed to find a way to do what was expected of them regardless of perceiving the expectations as not feasible, and they did not know how to acquire help on this. They both felt that administration should have sought their input on how distance learning was going for them or come to them and ask what they could do to help. Emma stated, "I don't have enough time to think about [the issues] and let [administration] know…So, it would've been really helpful if [administration] reached out to me and checked-up on me." Ellie shared a similar perception of not having time to seek help from administration and added that issues brought up in group settings were not being addressed, "…problems were being mentioned in meetings, but nothing was happening to fix those problems." Ellie also expressed that on the few occasions when she asked her administration for help or shared her feelings of being overwhelmed, she perceived her administrations' responses as lacking any guidance or support because no valuable information was shared, and the problem remained.

One participant indicated that she does not usually reach out to administration for support, and perceives herself as self-sufficient; however, she also indicated ineffective support when sharing that it was her first year teaching upper elementary and she did not feel that she had received any help from administration. She indicated that administration had not provided her any help, but she had not reached out to them for help.

Failures regarding teachers' workload

All the participants perceived that their administration failed to consider their workload and had not sought ways to alleviate the workload teachers faced during COVID-19, distance learning. The participants felt that there were tasks that administration could have taken on or delegated to staff members or a committee that would have reduced teachers' workload, of which they perceived as unmanageable. All three participants mentioned that administration could have helped with educating the parents about the general aspects of the distance learning platform, and the attendance and grading policies. Specifically, Rae stated,

> "Everybody has to work harder…this year, but it hasn't felt like that is happening across the board, with all staff lending a hand, for example, ensuring parents have access to PowerSchool, and a tutorial on how to use the [distance] learning platform; why does this fall on each individual teacher when one committee or person could help all of the parents and relieve teachers of a few tasks?"

In addition, it was collectively felt that administration should not be requiring teachers to investigate every absence daily, and perhaps administration should help, or delegate the task to a non-instructional staff member. They explained that with the forced transition to distance learning, there has been an increase in absences that is attributed to students who are either too young and incapable of attending distance learning without help from an adult, or students who are old enough to be home alone, but they are not disciplined enough to attend distance learning every day without an adult to promote their attendance. Two participants mentioned that, prior to COVID-19 distance learning, per year, teachers made minimal calls home regarding attendance; therefore, it was difficult for them to understand why, with this years' overwhelming workload, administration seemed content in expecting them to handle daily attendance related phone. Emma explained her experience as,

> "At this time, [distance learning during COVID-19] I feel like [teachers] are already going bonkers and being pushed to our limit and then you get this one more thing added [by administration] …I don't know if it's because [administration], who aren't teaching, just don't understand that [distance learning] is so much more [work] than if we were in [brick and mortar] and by asking me to do this, seemingly, kind of small thing; it just pushes me over the edge."

The perception that administration was failing to consider or understand the teachers' workload was strongly felt amongst participants and mentioned throughout the interview. They indicated that in previous years office support staff would typically be tasked with contacted parents about absences or would periodically provide dates to teachers and request that they contact parents for an excuse for the absences. More specifically Rae stated, "Admin[istration] has [told me], you need to contact parents [I] don't have [the] physical means to produce everything that admin[istration]...expects of me."

Aside from attendance, there was a shared perception that administration did not take the teachers' workload into account when requiring teachers to meet other added requests. Ellie expressed concern with the disregard administration took towards the teachers' mental health; after listing the extra responsibilities teachers were tasked with as a result of distance learning, she explained that if administration had chronicled the demands currently being placed on teachers, they would have found that the workload was impossible.

Teachers' sense of self-efficacy. The final theme that emerged was the participants' diminished sense of self-efficacy illustrated in their responses, when asked to compare their confidence in their ability to teach this year, to previous years. All three participants expressed that they love teaching, but they have not felt like they are doing a good job this year. There were

a few factors that contributed to their decreased sense of self-efficacy. One contributing factor was their lack of knowledge and experience in conducting distance learning. Specifically, Emma said, “I am wondering the whole time [during COVID-19 distance learning], what am I doing, and am I doing it right, and what are people expecting of me?” The participants shared a high sense of self-efficacy in previous years as brick and mortar teachers. They valued the materials in their classroom and the way in which they presented them. As trained Montessori educators they have a high regard for the teaching philosophy they embody, and all three of them struggled to transition this philosophy to the distance learning setting, leaving them with a loss of self-efficacy. Rae explained her perception in this way,

> “I often feel like I’m not doing a very good job. I don't feel like I'm doing enough, or like I'm doing it wrong; I feel like I need to do other things, I feel like my assignments aren’t engaging enough. I’ve never felt like this before.”

Collectively the participants expressed feeling stressed and overwhelmed in trying to meet the expectations of distance learning and their expectations of themselves as educators. They explained having to adjust their expectations to align with the situation they are currently facing. Ellie stated, “I know that whatever I'm giving is my best and [I] have to accept that, what was never my best before…is my best [now], with my current situation.”

Discussion

Discussion of Findings

The teachers’ perceptions of teaching distance learning during COVID-19 presented in this study show consistencies with the literature. First, the challenges of distance learning

perceived by the participants in this study when compared to Alea et al. (2020) show that teachers struggle to conduct distance learning when they lack proper training. Furthermore, a teacher's ability to manage time, stress of meeting administrator's deadlines and expectations with the limited time between online meetings, efficient parent communication strategies, and assessing students' work on the LMS are perceptions that the teachers in this study had in common with the 2,300 participants in the Alea et al. study. The participating teachers all shared several experiences wherein they felt overwhelmed by their workload; especially Ellie, who felt that teachers' well-being had not been considered, and their perception on this aligns closely to this quote: "It is possible that distance educators may suffer from high stress levels, mental health problems, and poor work-life balance due to the changing work role expectations they perceive" (Bezuidenhout, 2015, p. 13).

Anderson and Hira (2020) reported that the six teachers who participated in their study perceived a lack of individualized help for teachers and resources to aid teachers in transitioning to distance learning, as did the three participants in this study. Other similarities between Anderson and Hira and the findings of this study are the increased workload, the amount of time teachers spent working each day, and the teachers' need to decrease the curriculum to make up for the lack of time they are able to spend with their students.

As with the participants of this study, Midcalf and Boatwright (2020) reported teachers' perspectives on the difficulties of assessing students' knowledge based on work turned in online, not knowing how much help students have received in completing the work, and the lack of student participation in completing work. The three participants perception of concern for their students' success to do the virtual setting was found among the participants in Farmer and West (2019).

There are congruent perceptions of the teachers in this study and participants in literature that reports teachers' perceptions on distance learning during COVID-19; however, there are also similarities with the participants of this study and studies that include perceptions of distance learning educators who have chosen to teach distance learning, prior to COVID-19. The results of this study reveal that the participants acknowledged the importance of a distance learner's family support at home and indicated this as a challenge they faced (Burdina et al., 2019; The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning, 2018; Miron et al., 2018). Several other challenges the participants of this study faced align with literature such as a 2015 study by Archambault and Larson that revealed the necessity for distance learning educators to be trained and have developed skills in technology, time management, and communication that differs from those of a traditional brick and mortar teacher. Also, the teachers' responses in this study that highlight their perceived lack of preparedness to conduct distance learning during COVID-19, could have been predicted by the literature stating that technology resources and methodology, in addition to best practices for delivering distance learning, are not common in teacher preparation courses, thus teachers who chose to teach online require additional training to prepare for their role (Muilenburg & Burge, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of the lack of high quality and effective digital resources available to them have been an existing concern of distance learning teachers prior to COVID-19 (Farmer & West, 2019).

Implications for Practice

The results from this study, and the review of the literature alike, provide clear implications for practice. First, teachers must have adequate time and sufficient preparation prior to conducting distance learning. In the future, when a crisis requires campus closures, it should be standard that teachers are provided more than the usual allotted time to plan and prepare. To

aid in this transition, teachers should have some previous training or acclimation to the LMS their school will utilize in the presence of a crisis. This would require districts to have a plan in place and a LMS procured in advance. Furthermore, the expectations placed on teachers need to be evaluated for feasibility, and a plan should be in place that promotes individualized support for teachers' specific needs, as well as schoolwide support to alleviate teacher tasks that can be generalized and completed by a committee or staff member. A schools' emergency response team (or other appointed committee) should take part in preparation and support of a plan for school closures that require distance learning, just as they prepare plans for dangerous weather, fires, and campus intrusions. Part of the plan should address how they will support teachers and parents during distance learning and acquiring ways to support stress management amongst teachers. In short, districts and/or schools need a well-developed distance learning program and a coinciding plan that focuses on how to best support teachers and parents, who are the direct line to students' academic success during campus closures.

Preservice teachers should be appropriately prepared for distance learning, through their teacher preparation programs and continuing professional development as novice teachers (Avgerinou & Moros, 2020). In most cases, this requires restructuring and additions to teacher preparation programs. Districts should have a working plan that addresses school closures and continuing education for all. This plan should be reviewed each year and updated with the newest research-based practices for emergency distance learning. Educators and school leaders' insights should be included when making decisions about instruction during a crisis (Kaden, 2020). "Political discourse should now turn away from its ceaseless contestation and boundary protections and focus on how we can best draw on the wisdom and moral purpose of professional educators, principals, and teachers alike" (Kidson et al., 2020, p. 20).

Future Research

As instructional technology is continuously changing and evolving, perpetual efforts should be put forth to amplify the research on distance learning programs that districts can employ during a crisis, wherein students and teachers are separated geographically; these programs should be continuously evaluated (Alea et al., 2020). Additionally, pending research should place a focus on the specific contrasting competencies needed for teaching distance learning programs versus brick and mortar teaching and the ways to best improve upon teachers' preparedness within those competencies. For example, competencies needed for classroom discussions contrast greatly to competencies needed for distance learning asynchronous discussions (Pulham et al., 2018).

Additional research on this topic should include a narrowed focus on how school leaders can effectively support teachers during the transition to distance learning. Teacher burnout due to the increase in workload, expectations, and the resulting limited time of the distance learning teacher provide the ingredients for widespread teacher burnout (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Bezuidenhout, 2015). To avoid this risk, research is needed to develop ways in which schools, facing a crisis and a mandatory shift to distance learning, can alleviate some of the burden placed on distance learning teachers. This should also include feasible workload expectations and techniques or professional development on stress and time management techniques for distance learning teachers (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

Furthermore, due to the importance of parental involvement on distance learners' success (Curtis & Werth, 2015), research on best practices for distance learning, during a time of crisis, should include compiling research-based techniques that school leaders and educators can

employ to promote parents' success as at-home facilitators, and understanding how their role in their child's education changes during a mandatory shift to distance learning, due to a crisis.

Limitations

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. This study reported three teacher perspectives from one elementary school in the southeastern United States, thus it may not be an appropriate representation of all teachers in the United States. The participants in this study all used the same Learning Management System (LMS) and were provided the same training for this system, thereby limiting this report to teachers' perspectives employing this LMS. It is possible that an alternate LMS and/or training would produce dissimilar teacher perspectives.

References

Alea, L. A., Fabrea, M. F., Roland, R. D. A., & Farooqi, A. Z. (2020). Teachers' Covid-19 awareness, distance learning education experiences and perceptions towards institutional readiness and challenges. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *19*(6), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.6.8

Anderson, E., & Hira, A. (2020). Loss of brick-and-mortar schooling: How elementary educators respond. *Information and Learning Sciences*, *121*(5/6), 411–418. https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0085

Archambault, L., & Larson, J. (2015). Pioneering the digital age of instruction: Learning from and about K-12 online teachers. *Journal of Online Learning Research, 1*(1), 49-83. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148866.pdf

Avgerinou, M., & Moros, S. (2020). The 5-phase process as a balancing act during times of disruption: Transitioning to virtual teaching at an international JK-5 School. In R. E. Ferdig, E. Baumgartner, R. Hartshorne, R. Kaplan-Rakowski, & C. Mouza (Eds.), *Teaching, technology, and teacher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Stories from the field* (pp. 583-594). https://www.learntechlib.org/p/216903/

Bezuidenhout, A. (2015). Implications for academic workload of the changing role of distance educators. *Distance Education*, *36*(2), 246–262. https://doi.org/10.1080/-01587919.2015.1055055

Burdina, G. M., Krapotkina, I. E., & Nasyrova, L. G. (2019). Distance learning in elementary school classrooms: An emerging framework for contemporary practice. *International Journal of Instruction*, *12*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2019.1211a

Centers for Disease Control. (2020, September 13). *Indicators for dynamic school decision-making*. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/indicators.html

Curtis, H., & Werth, L. (2015). Fostering student success and engagement in a K-12 online school. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, *1*(2), 163–190.

Education Week. (2020, July 1). *The coronavirus spring: The historic closing of U.S. schools.* https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-covid-19-schools-open-closed.html

Farmer, T., & West, R. (2019). Exploring the concerns of online K-12 teachers. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, *5*(1), 97–118.

Girelli, C., Bevilacqua, A., & Acquaro, D. (2020). COVID-19: What have we learned from Italy's education system lockdown? *International studies in educational administration (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM))*, *48*(3), 51–58. https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ISEA-2020-48-3.pdf

Goswick, J., Macgregor, C. J., Hurst, B., Wall, P. J., & White, R. (2018). Lessons identified by the Joplin school leadership after responding to a catastrophic tornado. *Journal of Contingencies & Crisis Management*, *26*(4), 544–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12216

Jamshed, S. (2014). Qualitative research method-interviewing and observation. *Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy, 5*(4), 87–88.

https://www.jbclinpharm.org/articles/qualitative-research-methodinterviewing-and-observation.html

Kennedy, M. (2008). Research: The big mystery. *Digital Advisor*. Retrieved from https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/researchintro.htm

Kennedy, M. (2001, August). Interview guide RTL example. *The Research and Teacher Learning Study*. Retrieved from https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/-Research/rtlinterviewguide.pdf

Kidson, P., Lipscombe, K., & Tindall-Ford, S. (2020). Co-designing educational policy: Professional voice and policy making post-COVID. *International studies in educational administration (Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management (CCEAM))*, *48*(3), 15–22. https://www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ISEA-2020-48-3.pdf

Midcalf, L., & Boatwright, P. (2020). Teacher and parent perspectives of the online learning environment due to COVID-19. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *87*(1), 24–34. https://www.dkg.org/DKGMember/Publications/Bulletin-Journal.aspx

Miron, G., Shank, C., & Davidson, C. (2018). *Full-time virtual and blended schools: Enrollment, student characteristics, and performance*. National Education Policy Center. http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schoolsannual-2018

Muilenburg, L. Y., & Berge, Z. L. (2015). Revisiting teacher preparation: Responding to technology transience in the educational setting. *Quarterly Review of Distance*

Education, *16*(2), 93–105. https://www.infoagepub.com/qrde-issue.html?i=p55a9224047979

Pulham, E. B., Graham, C. R., & Short, C. R. (2018). Generic vs. modality-specific competencies for K-12 online and blended teaching. *Journal of Online Learning Research*, *4*(1), 33–52.

Roberts, R. E. (2020). Qualitative interview questions: Guidance for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(9), 3185-3203. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss9/1

The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning. (2017). *Why do students choose blended and online schools?* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED589983.pdf

Appendix A

Teachers' Perspectives on Distance Learning During COVID-19: Interview Guide

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Grade Range: 1st-5th

Before we start, could just remind me again, how long have you been teaching? __1-3 years __4-10 years __over 10 years

Interviewer: "These questions were formulated to gather insight to your lived experience as a teacher during COVID-19; this interview does not gain insight on how you performed your job. Just a reminder all answers, and information gathered from this interview are anonymous and kept confidential. Are there any reasons why you may not be able to openly share your experience with me?"

1. **How do you feel about how your school/district prepared you Distance Learning (i.e. preplanning) during COVID-19?**
    a. Can you tell me about the training you participated in during preplanning?
    b. Let's say you could go back to preplanning and help prepare your peers, what would you do that was not done for you initially?

2. **Think about this school year and distance learning during COVID-19. Tell me about the biggest obstacles you have had to overcome?**
    a. What do you wish would have been done to prepare you for this?
    b. What change has affected you most?

3. **As a distance learning teacher during COVID-19 how has your workload changed?**
    a. What consumes most of your time?

4. **Think about your confidence as an educator in previous years, and explain how it compares/contrasts to your confidence as an educator this year, during COVID-19 and distance learning?**
    a. From your perspective, what do you think has been the driving force behind the change in how you feel?
5. **Is there something you wish your administration would've done differently? How would that have improved your distance learning experience?**
    a. If you were an administrator is there anything you would've done differently? Why?
6. **We have discussed your preparation for distance learning and how that affected your ability to conduct distance learning, how do you feel about the parents' preparation for their role in distance learning?**
    a. Do you think the distance learning experience could have been improved if parents had been better prepared for their role? If so, how?

7. **Think about what next quarter might be like. What are your concerns for next quarter?**

Adapted from: Interview Guide RTL Example (Kennedy, 2001).

Kennedy, M. (2008) Research: The Big Mystery. Digital Advisor. Retrieved from https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/researchintro.htm

Kennedy, M. (2001, August). Interview guide RTL example. The Research and Teacher Learning Study. Retrieved from https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/rtlinterviewguide.pdf

Appendix B

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a project conducted as part of the requirements for a class in the Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading at Georgia Southern University. For this project I will be doing some interviews and collecting information to examine teachers' perspectives on distance learning during COVID-19. The data collection will be supervised by the course instructor:

Name: Dr. Cordelia Zinskie Telephone#: 912-478-1438

The purpose of this project is to help beginning researchers learn more about designing, conducting, and reporting research. The information generated will not be used for academic research or publication. Aggregate data will be shared in a research paper presented to my course instructor. All information obtained will be treated confidentially.

For this project, you will participate in an interview with me using a pseudonym. For this project, I will meet with you on Zoom and interview you about your perceptions of distance learning during COVID-19.

You are free to withdraw your participation at any time should you become uncomfortable with it. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at 912-665-6326. I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to share your experiences and viewpoints with me. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Kelly Arseneau
Professor: Dr. Cordelia Zinskie
Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Research
College of Education

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

_____ _____
Signature of Student/Researcher Date

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date