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The Lived Experiences of Selected Choral Directors During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Lived Experiences of Selected Choral Directors During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Angela Berna Milliren

**Dissertation submitted
to the College of Education and Human Services
At West Virginia University**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctorate of Education in
Instructional Design & Technology**

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**Morgantown, West Virginia
2022**

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Abstract

The Lived Experiences of Selected Choral Directors During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Angela Berna Milliren

The shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic found secondary choral teachers moving traditional performance-based courses to the online venue. The pedagogical changes needed include implementing technology and disseminating information through learning management systems. Relationships between teachers and students, and teachers and colleagues, were challenged with the physical distance of quarantines in the Spring of 2020. This dissertation research project examined the difficulties six teachers faced concerning technology and relationships. I sat down for semi-structured interviews with six colleagues where I asked about their backgrounds, relationships with students and fellow colleagues, and the changes the pandemic brought to their perceptions of teaching. To conclude, I discussed the themes that arose and unexpected findings such as the importance of mental health for the educators and the change in content from curricular-driven to vital lifelines for communication during the height of the pandemic.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

In March 2020, schools were shuttered as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. In Pennsylvania, the state government suggested a two-week closure of all schools to “flatten the curve” of this new virus sweeping the nation. With the stoppage of in-person learning, many schools struggled to shift to online or remote learning. Many challenges faced local districts. Technological inequities, the lack of online curriculum, pedagogical knowledge, and insufficient professional development plagued educators across the state as relationships became increasingly important in maintaining healthy students and choral programs.

The socioeconomic divide was never more evident than in the Spring of 2020 as neighboring districts were plunged into the realm of distance education. The more affluent districts quickly made technological adaptations to using the district-provided devices in each student’s hands. In contrast, struggling districts created paper packets to be delivered to students’ homes using the postal service (Ambrose, 2020; van de Werfhorst, 2020; Walters, 2020). Students who lacked internet access and technological devices were at a significant disadvantage to the students from more affluent households. The digital divide widened as the wealthier students continued to make educational progress throughout the school closures (Nichols, 2020, p. 69). The injustice to the students in financially strapped schools has further impeded the learning for students who turn to public education. These same students often rely on public schools for food, clothing, and shelter throughout the day. Schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas were turning their efforts to providing food to their students as their primary concern.

The shift in education from in-person instruction to online learning has changed the dynamic of student learning. While the core classes (i.e., English, Mathematics, History) faced challenging transitions to move the curricula to a fully remote format, performance-based courses were left in shambles as they had to reinvent themselves to continue. Music ensembles were dissolved as the individual singers were relegated to singing solo, isolated in homes across the nation. The group dynamic of singing in an ensemble, which is imperative to the audible blend of the voices as well as the pathos that occurs within the shared sound, was interrupted. Less self-assured singers, who rely on other singers for performance support, were unaided in their vocal attempts (Parker, 2010, 2014, 2018; Töres, 2020).

Choral directors scrambled to find solutions to keep students singing; however, for many, there were technical hurdles that were hindering their progress from moving to online learning. While most school districts were already using an online learning management system [LMS] and providing devices (computers or tablets) for each student, not all schools could afford this luxury for their students. Furthermore, the transition to using an LMS as part of the curriculum requires professional development to be offered for the faculties involved (de Jong 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Stickler et al., 2020).

While core teachers are often proficient in word processing and the basic computer skills needed to navigate and publish within the selected LMS, transitioning choral music to an online learning environment required additional professional development and software to continue education from afar. The need to create rehearsal files using recording software, such as Adobe's Audition or Apple's iWork Suite GarageBand or Logic Pro, left many educators scrambling to learn the skills needed to meet with success. If the choral director was fortunate enough to have students submit recordings (as students were also struggling to navigate the LMS from home),

the director was charged with creating a virtual choir. Virtual choirs, made popular by modern composer Eric Whitacre, feature individual video recordings that are synchronized to create a choir without the singers ever rehearsing together or being in the same location. To create a virtual choir, choral directors must have access to video software (Adobe Suite's Premiere Pro or Apple's Final Cut Pro). They require extensive professional development to be fluent in its implementation. Unfortunately, many choral directors lacked the experience in using the music recording software needed to produce virtual choirs. Extraneous hours were required to learn new software and many teachers found themselves overwhelmed and frustrated (Hash, 2020; Miksza, 2021).

Research Focus and Research Questions

Pilot Project

As a secondary choral director, I want to delve deeper into the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic with regard to choral programs across the state. I conducted a pilot study where I interviewed a colleague via Zoom asking three questions.

- What was your experience as a choir teacher living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- What role did music technology play?
- How did remote learning affect your relationships with students?

The pilot project was conducted in the spring of 2021 while the schools in the state were operating in either a fully remote or hybrid in-person schedule. Many choirs were relegated to singing at 10 foot intervals of social distancing indoors or were singing outdoors without masks. The pilot study helped to refine the scope of the interviews for this dissertation project.

Dissertation Project

For my dissertation project, I wished to delve deeper into the work of my pilot project. I expanded my number of respondents and interviewed six secondary choral teachers who are currently employed in Pennsylvania. The interviews were conducted in December 2020 and January 2021. School districts across the state had returned to full in-person learning, five days a week, and the teachers were all working full-time. Through the interviews, I hoped to learn more about the lived experiences of my colleagues as, together, we navigated these uncharted waters in education and singing. I also wanted to find out more about how the pandemic changed their perceptions of teaching now that schools had “returned to normal”. The interviews with participants sought to answer the following four research questions (see Appendix).

Table 1
Research Questions
RQ: What was the experience of choir teachers living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?
Sub Q1: What role did technology play?
Sub Q2: How did remote learning affect the teacher’s relationships with students and colleagues?
Sub Q3: Upon returning to the physical classroom, how do the teachers feel like teaching choir has changed?

Description of Sections

In the Literature Review, I review articles that explore the issues of moving to online teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic. Then I delve into the pandemic and the sudden transition for all teachers to online learning regarding professional development and technological needs. Finally, I analyze articles that focus on the relationships between teachers and students and the impact of the change from in-person to remote learning.

In the Methodology section, I identify my research design and the philosophical perspective through which I analyze the data. I describe the setting for the interviews and the participants. I introduce the participants using pseudonyms. Finally, I identify the limitations of my research.

In the Findings section, I reveal the themes that arose from the interviews. The themes align with the three subordinate questions regarding technology, relationships, and changes. In the summary, I discuss that overarching emotion of frustration and the chasm between the affluent and impoverished schools.

In the Discussion section, I return to the original research question and the subordinate questions to answer them through the eyes of the six teachers. I conclude with the overarching answer to the research question.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Teaching was Challenging Even Before the Pandemic

Before the Pandemic

Migrating to teaching online is not new to the pandemic. Karin Lewis explored the transition in her article “A Digital Immigrant Venture into Teaching Online” (2018). However, with the onset of the pandemic and remote learning, many additional educators struggled to meet the new demands. “I feel like I scrambled the entire semester, never catching up, not my best teaching for sure. I never got into my groove, never able to establish a manageable routine. This is untenable” (Lewis, 2018, p. 2). Teachers from across the country echoed this sentiment. The boundaries between work life and personal life were smudged out, and the teachers grew weary from the endless stream of work (Daubney & Fautley, 2020; Lewis, 2018).

Performance-based music classes were rarely offered in an online format prior to the pandemic. The music courses available were mostly music appreciation or music history (Littles, 2014). While an instructor can work online with an individual student and meet success, to work with more than one student simultaneously is problematic. The technology needed to hold a group rehearsal from multiple locations has yet to be developed (Martinec, 2020).

The Cacophony of the Sudden Transition

In March 2020, teachers were suddenly forced into continuing instruction as doors shuttered at schools across America. Finding the balance between work and home when working from home left many educators tirelessly working around the clock. For choral educators, the learning curve to create digital rehearsal tracks and virtual choir selections was an insurmountable task. The 8-hour workday quickly transformed into one endless cycle only interrupted by the sporadic nights of sleeplessness. As the school term drew to a close, many

music teachers began to weigh their options for the start of the 2020 - 2021 school term. Many teachers considered retirement, sabbaticals, and leaves of absences as the year on the horizon echoed the previous three months' exasperation.

The relationship formed between music educators and students were tested with the physical distance. Many ensemble directors follow students throughout the entirety of their secondary school music experience. With multiple years in a class, students and their respective music teachers form a strong bond, perhaps stronger than the bond with the core teachers who tend to only teach one grade level. The interaction of the teacher and student were hampered when learning turned to asynchronous classes that were either delivered via a learning management system or through printed packets. The pandemic severed the daily, in-person interactions and the mental health of the students took a toll (Uddin & Uddin, 2021). The longstanding relationships formed between choral directors and music students were challenged and the mental health of both parties was adversely effected.

Challenges the Pandemic Posed

New Software Requires Professional Development

The pedagogical paradigm shift with limited professional development found many already disheartened educators unprepared for fully remote instruction. While moving to an online venue was difficult for core curriculum teachers, fine arts teachers were especially flummoxed by the transition from in-person instruction with a performance ensemble to online Zoom classes. The need to adapt a school's music curriculum to support asynchronous remote learning was imperative due to technological constraints (Hash, 2020). While most school districts have provided ample training for their staff-at-large to navigate the learning management system, the specialized technology training needed in performance-based classes to

create a functional performance-based curriculum has been overlooked. Many music teachers have not received additional professional development regarding music technology (Fougler et al., 2017; Trust & Whalen, 2020). With the migration to online-only teaching, educators were suddenly thrown into creating classes in online learning management systems where they had to generate rehearsal tracks in place of reviewing musical parts in person. As Urkevich (2020) suggests, integrating technology into the fine and performing arts has been slow at best. Teachers struggle to find technological possibilities to continue providing instruction from afar.

In order to continue singing as an ensemble in an online environment, choral directors were charged with creating and distributing individual rehearsal tracks created using musical compositional software or purchased from independent vendors so that they might create virtual choirs. To create a rehearsal track, the teacher has to record a part to a click track using music recording software (Apple's GarageBand or Logic Pro X are frequently used). The click track ensures that all performers follow the same tempo. Then, each part is recorded to the click track. The students rehearse to the click track and then record while listening to the track using headphones. Once the files are submitted, the teacher synchronizes the files using video editing software (Apple's Final Cut Pro X or Adobe Premiere are both viable options) and publishes the final choir. Once again, the inequity of funding became increasingly relevant as school districts struggled to purchase technology for online instruction. The more affluent schools purchased the rehearsal tracks from online vendors. Others bought video and audio editing software such as the Adobe Suite or Final Cut Pro. With the new software acquisitions, the need for professional development on those platforms arose. While teachers attempted to create virtual choirs unaided, the software is cumbersome and left many looking for external support (Hash, 2020). Virtual choirs were made popular by modern choral composer Eric Whitacre. His most recent song

“Sing Together” was written for choirs to perform virtually throughout the pandemic (<https://youtu.be/InULYfJHKI0>). Teams of media professionals collected videos from 129 countries. The video features over 17,000 singers who submitted videos. In order to have choral programs perform as ensembles in remote learning, educators undertook the task to create virtual choirs for spring concerts and online graduation ceremonies. Those who were fortunate enough to have students, former students, or colleagues who were already well-versed in video editing quickly made strides to create the needed files. The learning curve was great, and it only served to add to the overwhelmed educators.

Difficulty in Monitoring Student’s Needs Online

The relationships forged between choral teachers and students are formed over multiple years and classes. All too frequently, high school students turn to trusted choral directors with the struggle of being teenagers. Students who were unable to speak with their educational confidants felt abandoned. The lack of connection left many students with mental health needs just as teachers were finding it increasingly difficult to monitor students’ needs in online classes (Philippe et al., 2020). Part of the attraction to teaching high school choir is the relationships formed with students and the convivial classroom environment. A choral ensemble’s group dynamic is one of the largest draws for students to remain active within a secondary school’s music program. However, with the drastic shift to online learning, those connections suffered. Directors were no longer sharing in the live community of performance. As students learned via online teleconferencing software platforms (i.e., Zoom, Google Hangouts), connectivity issues arose. While Internet connections placed some students at a disadvantage, the actual relationship of attending classes was also challenged. Students were either not joining online classes due to personal constraints or decisions, or they would join the class only to “walk away” as cameras

were turned off and accountability for attendance was harder to monitor. Lewis (2018) noted this in her observations of teaching online prior to the pandemic. The mass exodus to online learning only served to exacerbate this situation as all classrooms were now virtual classrooms across the nation. The emotions that accompanied the change in physical proximity were evident in both students and choral directors alike. With the physical proximity of teaching removed, the accountability for students decreased, and the learning environment suffered.

Additional Challenges Faced by Music Teachers

The technology and professional development made available to teachers and students prior to the pandemic would set the stage for success or failure. The cleaving of students from the buildings in which there were limited technological resources available found them abandoning the art of singing. Many music teachers had never explored the music technology that would be needed to teach remotely, nor did they even fathom that the expectation would be for them to become distance learning educators (Bauer, 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of music technology in music curricula has not been to focus of professional development for choral directors across the commonwealth prior to the pandemic (Bauer, 2021; Shaw & Mayo, 2021). The addition of music technology training in undergraduate programs is still in its infancy and seasoned educators are immigrants to the programs that are available (Herther, 2009; Holliman, 2021).

Choral directors across the state who were fortunate enough to work in a district with technology readily available to all students with internet access turned to Zoom and Google Hangouts as they desperately wanted to maintain progress in those initial two weeks of the closure. Quickly, it became apparent that teachers' available technology to hold virtual rehearsals is riddled with latency issues. Latency issues (the time it takes to move between two points)

occur as the speed of each user's internet connection in a Zoom meeting is at a different bandwidth allowance (the amount or size of information being sent). The speed of each connection is relative to the number of users on a network, the level of service the individual purchases, and whether the user is relying on a wireless or wired connection to access the internet.

This problem was not unique to Pennsylvania; it plagued music programs around the globe. "It has also been heartening to see that, around the UK and other parts of the world, organizations and individuals have taken on the challenges to find new and different ways for teachers to facilitate online learning and musical collaboration. While the technology available to many households has brought to the fore issues with latency, rendering live ensemble playing challenging, if not impossible" (Daubney & Fautley, 2020). Teachers abandoned the latency-bogged virtual rehearsal spaces provided by services like Zoom in place of creating rehearsal tracks for virtual choirs as the technology available was incapable of hosting a synchronous class with music performance. The rehearsal tracks were accessible for the students as independent study material that were then recorded and submitted for evaluation.

The shift to online learning required a music ensemble director to redesign one's entire curriculum as "emergency education" took place in the spring of 2020 (Parkes et. al., 2021). In addition to the difficulties teachers faced with delivering online instruction, the physical separation from their ensembles for remote learning took an additional toll on the educators' well-being. Choral directors reported higher levels of depression during the pandemic across the board (Parkes et. al., 2021).

The State of Music Education Pennsylvania

According to the Pennsylvania regulations for graduation, students are not required to specifically enroll in a music course in order to qualify to graduate. Music falls under the course electives that include foreign languages, business education, industrial arts, computer science, and art (Graduation Requirements, 2022). As schools shifted to online learning, it was imperative that students still received instruction in the core curriculum required for graduation (Shaw & Mayo, 2021). The elective courses, especially music ensembles that rely on group music making, were particularly challenging to move to the online venue (Shaw & Mayo, 2021). When school districts faced budgetary constraints during the pandemic, the fine arts were often considered for the dreaded chopping block as they are superfluous to the state requirements (Shaw, 2018).

Research Focus and Research Questions

This paper examines the lived experience of six secondary choral teachers in Pennsylvania throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as revealed through individual interviews regarding technology, relationships, and career outlooks for the future. First, I examine the music technology needed to teach in an online venue and the professional development offered to my participants. Then I will examine the relationships music educators have after successive years of teaching students enrolled in secondary choral ensembles. Finally, I uncover the changes to education as perceived by the teachers.

Through a postphenomenological lens, attention is given to the technological hurdles, the performance constraints of online learning, and the impact the pandemic has had on the relationships with students from the beginning of the pandemic and throughout the subsequent year. I have chosen a postphenomenological lens as I believe all experiences are dependent on those that come before and will color those to follow. Turning to post-phenomenologist Gilles

Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968), "...no two grains of dust are absolutely identical, no two hands have the same distinctive points, no two typewriters have the same strike, no two revolvers score their bullets in the same manner" (p. 26). Each participant has a unique story of how they came to be at the start of the pandemic; each teacher had a different experience throughout the pandemic and the experiences of the pandemic, thus far, have produced unique outcomes on each teacher.

I strive to discover and share what the lived experience of six secondary choral educators throughout the COVID-19 pandemic entailed for their professional lives. I examine the technological hurdles the participants might have faced. I delve into the role of the group dynamic and relationships within an ensemble and with the director as it occurs within a rehearsal environment. Finally, I ask each participant to share how teaching choir post-pandemic has changed their perceptions of choral education. The specific research questions are:

- What was the experience of choir teachers living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- Sub RQ 1: What role did technology play?
- Sub RQ 2: How did remote learning affect the teacher's relationships with students and colleagues?
- Sub RQ 3: Upon returning to the physical classroom, how do the teachers feel like teaching choir has changed?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Researcher

My desire to conduct this research is fueled by my passion for teaching secondary choral music. I began teaching choir in the fall of 1999. My suburban district has a nearly 40% free and reduced lunch rate. The average graduating class size is roughly 160 students. The administration has done an exemplary job as they have applied for grants to ensure the students are provided with every possible technological tool, including a 1:1 Initiative from Apple. In 2007, I also began a media program at the high school where I teach print media and multimedia production. Over my 23 year tenure as a choral director, I have built a quality program that finds students auditioning into state and national choirs. Several of my students have received full-ride scholarships to college to be part of a university choral program. As a lifelong choral singer, I embrace the group dynamic of performance and relish the relationships I have built within my own professional choral experiences. Through the collegiate and professional choral groups with whom I have performed, I was able to sing on major stages around the globe. With the choral groups for which I serve as the choral director, I have taken students across the country to sing. It is far more than the performance that makes those experiences so dear to my heart; it is the relationships forged as singers experience the world through a shared lens. While they share in that lens, they also bring unique perspectives as individuals to the group.

I was utterly distraught when my choral ensembles were silenced in March of 2020. At first, I was lulled into a false sense of hope that we would be returning two weeks later. We were told we would not be returning to the building to finish the year in early April. I hold a master's degree in Multimedia Technology. As an Adobe Educator, I have a strong background in creating media pieces which enabled me to quickly create rehearsal files for my remote students. My

students were provided with rehearsal files the first week apart in March. We were able to continue learning, although modified for the remote setting, and the students were treated to seeing a virtual choir at the end of the year. While it was not the same as being together on stage singing, students could see one another, and the year had some sense of closure with a virtual performance.

My district had asked me to serve as an early adopter of its chosen learning management system [LMS] in 2013. A learning management system is an online backpack and repository for learning. Online learning modules with lessons and assignments are made available to students. Students then complete the assignments and submit them through the system. I was also the first faculty member to migrate to Canvas (the latest LMS chosen by my district) in 2017. With my doctoral studies in Instructional Design and Technology, I was prepared to create classes that were interactive and that integrated media.

It was a different experience for colleagues in my department. While the students were missing from my Zoom sessions, and it seemed as if there would be extra time to develop my courses, I found myself spending more time with the managerial tasks of grading and communicating with parents. My colleagues were struggling to navigate Canvas and the creation of media artifacts was taking them a great deal of time. I found myself on Zoom and GoToMeeting with my colleagues as I helped them transition to online learning. We met almost daily in the evening to discuss the pedagogical and technological issues we encountered that day. I also met with individuals throughout the day to help with technical needs.

Canvas makes it possible to share lessons and modules with any other user of the LMS. I shared several modules with my colleagues in other districts. We launched those lessons

simultaneously and shared our classroom experiences. Learning online opened the virtual windows to our classrooms, and we were able to create and share in instruction.

Creating rehearsal files and rendering virtual choirs was outside the wheelhouse for many of my colleagues who are secondary choral directors in other districts. Before the pandemic, I would meet with my colleagues at several professional development days throughout the year. During the pandemic, I spent hour upon hour providing free professional development to my friends. I found myself recommending hardware and software packages in order that they might be able to create their own virtual choirs. My friends in more affluent districts were permitted to hire professionals to produce their virtual choral concerts, for which the district paid, while my friends from economically disadvantaged districts struggled to communicate with students who lacked devices and access to any LMS. The inequity was evident in the final performances of the 2019 - 2020 school year.

Great divides seemed to open along the fault lines of socioeconomic status and professional development that found students disappearing from our programs into the abyss. The programs in socioeconomically disadvantaged districts held no virtual spring concerts. The silence that befell those programs led to lower enrollments in the successive year, and some programs were silenced for the foreseeable as the enrollment decline saw districts eliminating secondary choral education.

My colleagues and I met regularly or online, where we shared in our common angst about the state of our choral programs. Many tears were shed as our rosters began to shrink going into the 2020-2021 school year. I saw my thriving program of 150 singers dwindle to 70 students. Students were forced into credit recapture or were placed in remediation for failing grades from the pandemic closure. Elective courses, like choir, are removed from student schedules if the

student needs core credits to meet the graduation plan. I tried to remain positive. The 2021-2022 school year would surely see a rebound with the return to in-person learning; sadly, I was mistaken. My current roster features 60 students. Trying to remain optimistic about the future of the program I built is a daily struggle.

I have chosen to research the lived experience of my colleagues so that I might be able to provide a support system. Our area holds a tight-knit community of music educators. Aside from attending conferences and choral festivals annually, we have become true friends through our shared love for our vocations. I hope to share our narrative so that other music teachers know they are not alone in their struggles and provide a glimmer of hope that we will persevere and rebuild our choirs.

Research Design

In deciding upon the design for my research project, I turned to the past literature from my qualitative coursework and the existing literature in music education research. With a post-phenomenological lens, I look at the ‘through-ness’ of each teacher and the relationship the teachers have with technology. I chose the phenomenological lens because each story has a unique start and a different conclusion. Don Ihde’s post-phenomenological philosophies are based in human interactions with technology. I chose to follow the post-phenomenological approach as this study looks to understand how moving to remote education and online teaching changed the student-teacher dynamic and potentially altered the future of teacher’s vocations.

Post-phenomenological studies must have two things in common, first they must examine the relationship between humans and technology. Second, they must combine philosophical analysis with empirical investigation (*Postphenomenology*, 2018; Rosenberger, R., & Verbeek, P.P., 2015). The challenges that faced teachers and students, who were solely accustomed to

in-person learning, were complicated by the technological platform that awaited them in remote learning.

By investigating the participants' lived world (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016a 2016b), I aim to understand better how individuals experienced secondary choral music education during the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope not to quantify the experience but to explore the narratives through interviews to understand the stories of my fellow music educators in the transition that befell the choral programs.

Imagine a child with a fresh set of Play-Doh®. Once the clay has left the containers and been touched by hands, it will never be the same as the starting point. Different colors of the clay are and will be mixed in at different rates. The lids on the containers might not permanently be sealed. Each set of Play-Doh® is unique to its past usage and will continue to morph with each successive use. The onset of the pandemic finds the choral director holding a lump of clay that has already been molded over successive years of teaching. The state of the clay is relevant to the district's socioeconomic status and the health of the choral program. The pandemic either saw careful tending in districts with the means and training to continue playing or lids left ajar in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools. Picking up the clay upon the return to schools finds teachers facing different positions, and the state of the clay determines the present for them. It is far harder to mold Play-Doh® that has started to dry. While all teachers have the clay with which they started, no two blobs are the same. Phenomenologically speaking, each choral program is a blob of clay. Post-phenomenologically speaking, teaching choral music solely through synchronous online spaces while employing a learning management system is the container into which the blob of clay is forced.

Drawing upon the post-phenomenological philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Vagle, 2018), I acknowledge that choral directors entered the pandemic with different educational backgrounds, different choral programs, and different relationships that were pre-existing as the world changed in March of 2020. Each teacher had unique experiences as they endured the change in education. Each teacher came to online teaching with different levels of technological skills. I recognize the experience continues for choral educators, and the ripple effects of the pandemic will continue to be integral to writing their own, unique stories as each teacher continues to move forward within their career. In the ‘through-ness’ of the individual experience, I join the multiple narratives that are constructed.

Paying homage to my reflexivity as a choral educator for the past 23 years, I came to the interview as a relational researcher (Finlay, 2002; Vagle, 2018). While an ethnographic study can examine the culture of secondary choral educators, it would not provide the insight into the lived experience I wished to explore regarding the pandemic and the unique experiences encountered by my colleagues. An ethnographic study would delve into the culture of secondary choral educators. I yearn to understand the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on each educator and discover themes relative to the pandemic. An investigative phenomenological study that employs a post phenomenological lens looks at the experiences of teaching through a pandemic.

Through a hermeneutic approach (van Manen, 2016b), I wanted to see the world as it has morphed and continues to change as experienced by the educators I interviewed (Vagle, 2015; Vagle & Hofsess, 2015; van Manen, 2017) and examined how it aligns with my own experiences and those encountered in the pilot project. Hermeneutics is the study of texts for literal and intended meanings (Merriam, 2016). The texts, in the case of this project, are the transcriptions of interviews with my colleagues. Looking for insight into the lived nature of

shifting the delivery model for instruction and the frustrations and triumphs with technology integration, I wanted to discover the relationship with technology as it aligns with Don Ihde's post-philosophies (Ihde, 1990).

Don Ihde identifies several relations in his postmodern philosophy: hermeneutic, embodiment, alterity, and background relations. With regards to this study, I was most interested in his hermeneutic and embodiment relations. An example of a hermeneutic relation is when we check the weather by looking at the news, an application, or even a thermometer mounted outside our homes and then determine how we dress. We align ourselves to the world, and the weather, as the temperature broadcast by technologies (new or old) are united as one to provide the forecast. Hermeneutically speaking, the text on the thermometer or the screen is interpreted by the reader and infers the intended meaning of whether it is hot or cold. We interpret how we might dress. In Ihde's embodiment relation, one relies on technology to be part of the world. I sometimes find myself fumbling to find my glasses in the morning when I awake. Without my glasses (which are considered a tool created by my optometrist using technology and science), I am not able to relate to the world. I need my glasses to be able to interact with the world. In turning from in-person to online learning, the teachers suddenly had technology as the primary source of communication. Checking on students, much like the weather, was through technology. The next generation of digital learners come to technology in an embodied relationship for many tasks. However, learning online was a new skill set that left students and teachers in a quandary.

I also wanted to learn of the perceived importance of relationships within the classroom and how the change from in-person classroom learning to remote learning affected those relationships. Through this interpretive phenomenological investigation, I aimed to understand our shared lived experiences with regards to the post-phenomenological lens. I acknowledge that

each teacher's experience has a different starting point, different circumstances throughout the pandemic, and now lies in various states of being.

I called upon the six methodical activities proposed by van Manen (2016b) to serve as a framework for my research (see Table 3). First, I turned to the nature of the lived experience of teaching choral music during the pandemic through researching the existing literature so I might have a better understanding of the experiences of others. Next, I investigated the lived experiences of six colleagues in my local area by conducting 30-60 minutes interviews via Zoom. Once the interviews are collected and transcribed, I listened to them and then read the transcripts several times as I then authored reflective and descriptive texts. I repeated this process with the remaining participants. Once all interviews had been transcribed and analyzed, I uncovered the overarching themes. Recalling the post phenomenological through-ness of each participant's lived experiences while examining the hermeneutic relation to technology, I created a narrative through anecdotal writing that shares the individual stories of each participant while bringing to light the unifying themes all participants encountered in Chapter 3 and 4.

Table 2

van Manen's Steps (1990)

Steps	Researchers Activities
Turning to the nature of lived experience	Examine a secondary choral educators experience during the COVID-19 pandemic
Investigating experience as we live it	Interview six selected choral educators who taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic via Zoom.

Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection	Listen in live time and review video interviews and transcripts for themes Gather additional clarification, if needed, through additional interviews or written communication
Hermeneutic phenomenological writing	Share the lived experiences through writing
Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation	Continue drawing from the philosophies of Husserl, Deleuze, Guattari and Ihde as I explore the data
Balancing the research context by considering parts and wholes	Unite themes to provide a picture of the whole experience

Participants

The participants I interviewed are all secondary choral teachers who are actively teaching high school choir in the state of Pennsylvania. All participants are active members of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association [PMEA]. The participants have taught for a minimum of five years. These criteria are essential as the educators have experienced several years of teaching choral music prior to the pandemic's onset in order to have a basis of comparison with how things have changed in the profession. I have developed a friendship with all of the participants and we associate outside of our work lives. These friendships have grown stronger over the years of working together. I was able to conduct interviews that were intimate and personal.

The six participants have been selected from a cross-section of districts in Pennsylvania. It is essential to review both larger and smaller school districts to evaluate the lived experiences of choral teachers. Financial constraints, student socioeconomic status, district-provided

professional development, and availability of technology for teachers and students are imperative factors in telling the story of the pandemic and its effect on individual programs.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Years of Service	School's % of Free & Reduced Lunch	Enrollment			
			Average Graduation Class	Average Choral Program Pre-Pandemic	Average Current Choral Program	% Decrease in Enrollment
Matthew	31	30%	200	190	93	51%
Becky	21	*100%	120	**60	**0	100%
Sally	24	*100%	250	125	50	60%
Scott	20	25%	350	120	100	17%
Evan	9	10%	475	160	125	22%
Janet	17	15%	265	210	80	62%

*Once a district passes a threshold for free or reduced lunch rate, Pennsylvania provides breakfast and lunches at no cost to all students.

**Becky's program is currently after school only. No curricular program is scheduled. She has yet to start rehearsals due to transportation issues for students.

Matthew

I first met Matthew in 1992 when he was a first-year teacher and I was a sophomore in high school. He was hired to teach middle school band and chorus in the same district in which he works today. In the late 1990s, he transferred to the high school where he taught band and choir. As the program grew, the district added a full-time band director, and Matthew became a

full-time choir director. He is an accomplished pianist and has performed with a semi-professional a cappella singing group as well as directing musicals in public theaters as well as at the school in which he is employed.

Matthew expressed his frustration with teaching in-person and online simultaneously throughout the pandemic. In August of 2020, Matthew (like most of the other teachers with whom I spoke) was charged with conducting in-person and synchronous online learning simultaneously.

“And it got to the point where I just...partway through us teaching in front of our cameras in that next school year, partway through our hybrid scenario I said to my principals, "Just so you know, I'm done being glued in front of a camera. This isn't teaching. I guarantee you, the students at home are not at their laptops or at their devices. Their cameras are off. They're not even paying attention. I am unwilling to now stand there and not teach the students in front of me in my room because I've got to be glued in front of a camera to people who aren't even paying attention. I'm unwilling to do that."

Students were sitting in performance-based classes where they were not permitted to perform. One by one, students were asking to drop the classes. Matthew's enrollment echoed those of the other teachers I interviewed. I found one interaction he reported with his administrator to be especially telling of the quagmires many music educators faced.

“But he [administrator], that year, said to me, "You need to do something to keep them in [enrolled in chorus]." And I said, "Well, what do you want me to do? Chorus isn't chorus. This isn't what they signed up for." He said, "I don't know. Make it fun for them. Play some tunes. Let them just jam out." And I looked at him. I said, "You literally want me to be a middle school DJ, karaoke DJ?" He said, "Whatever it takes." I said, "All right.

Fine." So I went in that... That was a Friday morning. I went into the cafeteria. I hooked my sound system up to my laptop and I started playing karaoke tracks. And I'd say to the kids, "What do you want to hear next? What song you want to... Okay, let's do this one." One girl said, "Let It Go." I'm like, literally, a middle school student wants to sing Let It Go. And all of the other kids are rolling their eyes. And just at that time my principal walked in to hand me something. And I said, "Hey, I'm just doing karaoke here. It's a blast. What song would you like to sing?" I gave him those eyes. And you could see his grin behind his mask, but I wanted him to know this is not working out the way you thought it would. The kids looked so bored."

The difficulty in changing an in-person learning experience of choral singing in a large group to silenced listening and music theory took its toll on many choral programs, Matthew's included.

Becky

Becky teaches in a district that has many impoverished students. In 2008, I cohosted a large music event with her and remember entering her building for the first time. The state had subsidized a new building as the prior school was nearing being condemned. The new building was far nicer than the building in which I teach. However, when I entered the building, the state provided no furnishings, and they were all salvaged from the prior facility. The facade of an attractive exterior and an inferior interior is an ironic statement in the current state of the district music program.

As a talented musician, Becky can teach any level of music with ease. She currently has no performance-based choral classes built into her day. In August 2020, the district canceled all performance-based classes citing the pandemic as the reason. When Becky started her

employment in the district, they employed five music teachers. Today, there is one - Becky. As I interviewed her, I was able to see the pain on her face and her tear-filled eyes.

“I think that one thing I really had to separate myself from just being in a school district that doesn't... Yeah, I don't know. I don't want to say doesn't respect the arts because I do think that the school board does. It's just they just don't understand what that means. I think one thing that's really important is that I just have to identify that when choices are made that really cut back student access to the arts, to music, I just have to know that that wasn't my choice, right, so I can't... Even if I know better, I can't carry that.”

The district furloughed most fine arts teachers at the onset of the pandemic upon remote instruction. Fortunately for her, after having her own children and wanting additional job security, Becky became state certified in Business, Computers, and Information Technology. Her position was spared, and she currently teaches several general music classes and several technology courses.

There is an option to participate in the chorus, but it is solely extracurricular and occurs after school. Transportation is an issue for many students whose financially-strapped parents are either working or there is no working vehicle in the household. She is working on placing rehearsal files on Canvas (the LMS selected by the district) but is having issues with creating an extracurricular section. The district pays her a meager wage of \$800 to work with students after school hours for an entire year.

Despite the challenges of her schedule, she is very dedicated to providing the best experience possible for her students. Becky has always been very optimistic about teaching and music. She is passionate about being an advocate for underserved youth. The onset of the pandemic left Becky's program in shambles.

“It was my most diverse group of students yet, well over the school population, as far as students that are not considered white. I just really felt like, "Okay, I'm reaching kids. Kids are coming. They're trying to get a ride. They're coming after school, 100% free and reduced kids. How do they get transportation? How do they see this as important?" I really felt like we were breaking through some of those boundaries, right? So then I think, as soon as we hit March [2020]...they were into it, they were involved, and then everything just stops, right? Everything just stops.”

Her love for her students and providing them with quality music education was evident throughout our interview. Several times, Becky wept for the state of education and the well-being of her students.

Sally

Meandering around the Piazzo San Marco as a college freshman in 1995, I first spent quality time with Sally. We were from the same university and were on a three-week tour of Europe singing in the great cathedrals. I was separated from my friends and terrified when Sally and her friends ran into the lost, lonely freshman and ensured I would survive. Sally is the most upbeat, optimistic person I know, which carries into her teaching career. Her school district neighbors the one in which I teach. It is much more diverse and has many issues with violent behavior amongst the students at large.

At the onset of the pandemic, the school was not equipped to provide technology to its students and the year was truncated at the close of the third quarter. When she began teaching in the district, there were 12 music teachers. Now, there are six remaining. Many cuts have been made to the fine arts, including the middle school choir. Sally teaches in a district with “no feeder program” (or no middle school choir to promote numbers into the high school).

Sally, like Becky, is working in a district with a high at-risk population and the pandemic and issues that have been borne out of it have had a marked impact on her students. The most recent fallout from the pandemic is a shortage of bus drivers. Students are left with no transportation to get to school to learn.

“Then I came across this girl who I hadn't seen in a couple of weeks. It was the saddest TikTok I had ever seen in my life. It made me cry. My daughter hugged me, she's like, "Mom, why are you crying at a TikTok?" Because it's so sad. It was basically it was this "Happy birthday to me" kind of sad TikTok, like "I turned 18, but nobody's here to celebrate with me." I'm still getting teary eyed. It was so sad. I hadn't seen her. I was like, "Oh my gosh. Is she okay?" I was really, really worried about her. So, I called home and the mom said, "Oh, she's fine. She's fine. It's just she can't get to school because I work nights and I don't get home until about 9:00 in the morning. My husband leaves super early, and her bus doesn't come."

The relationship between teacher and student is imperative to helping many students graduate. More impoverished students are being denied transportation to get to school with the shortage of bus drivers in many districts.

Scott

Scott was introduced to me through a mutual friend early on in his career. He is technologically savvy and very devoted to both choral education and being a church musician. Creating virtual choirs and implementing the technology already provided through his district made the pandemic less of a technical challenge for him.

“I've always kind of been a tech kid. I was in graphic arts in high school. And I think because of the age that we grew up in, being sort of not quite gen X and not quite gen Y,

technology was evolving as high school was happening. And so I just naturally kind of gravitated toward it to the point where I was actually teaching my graphics teacher, how to use some of the publishing software.”

He spent countless hours helping his colleagues, both in his district and fellow music educators in the neighboring districts, to navigate the tools needed to successfully teach music online.

The district in which Scott teaches hosts an Apple 1:1 initiative for technology. Every student is provided with an iPad, and teachers have both iPads and MacBooks. The district uses Google Classroom as its Learning Management System, which was not implemented until the start of the 2020-2021 school year. The final nine weeks of the 2020 school term were markedly different.

“So I had a subscription to UTheory that I assigned the students multiple times and kept checking in with them. And students had like either not done it or hadn't finished it or were having trouble with it. And so they just were not completing it. And then I needed to submit some grades. And after about the third extension, I finally got the students to put everything in, just so that we could get our Quarter four grade in. I was originally going to do some virtual rehearsals with the students, but then once our spring concert was canceled, we did attempt a virtual choir. I had no motivation to do anything for school at all. I devoted most of my time on trying to make sure our church services were happening because nobody in my congregation had any technical abilities, but I spent a lot of time on the couch watching Netflix. We just had absolutely no accountability for the students at all. So I felt really no sense of urgency to do anything.”

Scott's frustration with the end of the 2019-2020 school year echoes throughout each interview I conducted.

Evan

Evan is the youngest teacher with whom I sat down for an interview. I first met Evan when he had his first long-term substitute teacher position. He still has the intensity to build a program and the ability to see the program from a 30,000-foot view. Evan is an accomplished organist and has a beautiful singing voice. When he is not teaching, he is also employed as a church organist and has played recitals across the region.

The district in which he works is high-performing and affluent. He has a strong booster program that provided many opportunities to his students and his district provides a budget that permits for many accoutrements not available to programs like those in Becky's or Sally's districts. Evan was able to purchase rehearsal tracks and pay for a professional through his choral budget to create a virtual choir for his program while the choirs were learning remotely or socially distanced in a hybrid model.

Provided every technological need, Evan's foray through teaching virtually was vastly different from the others I interviewed.

“They were offering microphones, they were offering cameras, they were offering document cameras. I had them buy for me...The document camera they got to me was a \$400 camera, and I use it still. Pretty much every day, just projecting it on the television is so huge just for helping kids who are learning to read music and whatever else. Our technology department, we have been fortunate to have a pretty large repertoire of microphones and other equipment and things. Going into the recording stuff, we had all of that. It was pretty much whatever you need to teach, we will buy. We'll worry about the prices later.”

Despite the affluence of his district, his students' behaviors and interactions were in line with the other teachers I interviewed in the Spring of 2020. Students, without expectations of participation that were tied to mandatory grades, stopped attending classes.

Evan's observation of the role of technology for his students was very insightful. The cultural shift to online learning made him feel more distant from the current students' generation.

“Over the course of the pandemic, there has been a cultural shift that has been very challenging, based on what you have to accommodate. Just to where the kids are culturally, their culture has changed in a way that is new to me and probably new to a lot of us that is, in many ways, foreign maybe for the first time, that I feel very much. Even with my earlier [generation] Zs and these [current students], there's just such a difference in the level of consumption of technology. It's something that I relate to far and far and far less than I did just a few years ago. I think a lot of that is just how much time has been spent and how much of life has gone online, especially for them. I think that those of us who grew up who are still technological nomads, and I'm probably one of the last tech immigrants, technology was still new at the end of my high school experience... Those of us, post-pandemic, I think who will know what life is to be like independent of technology, and are able, and understand, and mature enough to put boundaries between our human lives and technology lives, I think kids, they are not able to do that, and I think that has really changed a lot.”

His prophetic view of the role of technology in the lives of current and future students takes Marc Prensky's “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants” to a new precipice. Despite the district, affluent or disadvantaged, the students' relationship with technology has been partially formed by the pandemic.

Janet

With a plucky outlook on the pandemic, Janet provided great insight (as did Sally) into being a parent during the pandemic. Both ladies enjoyed the opportunity to be home with their own children in the Spring of 2020. I first met Janet when she attended a PMEA festival as a new teacher. As an accomplished pianist and an upbeat teacher, she built a choral legacy in her district. Once the director of choirs grades 6-12, she built numbers that required hiring a second teacher. Currently, she is solely responsible for teaching the high school choir.

The district is growing at epic rates. With an influx of new students, the buildings are running out of space to accommodate the classes. Janet is teaching in a new facility that opened several years ago. While the district has its share of affluent families, there is a population boom of immigrants moving into the schools.

The school district supports a Google Chromebook 1:1 Initiative for its students and staff. At the onset of the pandemic, Janet was able to provide lessons for her students through SmartMusic®. Her students returned in a hybrid format last school year. She continues to use SmartMusic® as part of her curriculum.

Janet has met with declining enrollment, as have all the teachers I interviewed, upon returning from the pandemic. She reported averaging 40 incoming freshmen each year. This year nine students total were on her rosters for the youngest choir. Janet also noted that students had had begun using the pandemic an excuse for not attending events.

“I think the kids are apathetic now, or they're lazy. They know that, oh, all you have to do is say something is wrong, and then they can get away with it. I had a kid that didn't come to the Christmas concert, and he's like, ‘Oh, I had symptoms of COVID.’ I'm like, ‘Did you?’ I'm like, ‘Because everything is a symptom of COVID. That's not your excuse. Did

you test positive?’ He's like, ‘Well, no, I didn't get tested.’ So they're using it as a tool to be like, ‘Oh, I don't have to do anything because...’ And you can't fail me, because it's a pandemic. You know what I mean? And the kids are doing that left and right, with everything, just not in chorus. We are all screwed...It's like starting over from ground zero.”

I have been friends with Janet since she began teaching. Several years ago, she had some very serious medical issues that plagued her. Throughout the entire ordeal, she was still optimistic and positive about teaching. However, Janet’s usual upbeat persona has been altered by the experiences of the last 18 months. The pandemic has been a massive strain on her program.

Data Collection

Due to the COVID Pandemic and social distancing, I interviewed my participants via an online video conferencing platform (Zoom). Through this method, I could not only hear the context of the dialogue we shared; but also look for physical cues and context. The body language of the participants can tell its own story and direct the line of questioning. The interviews were semi-structured (Appendix). The interviews lasted from 60-90 minutes in length. The participants gave consent to the recording of the interview for the purposes of review and analysis. The focus of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the participants’ professional lives throughout the pandemic and to understand better how it might have impacted their personal lives. I seek to understand the implications of my participants’ current day status in education and how teaching through a pandemic might have changed their career trajectory.

The interviews were recorded in order that I might be able to fully invest my attention in the interview process. My prior relationships with my participants made for intimate interviews that were open and brutally honest. In our shared journeys through teaching online, I could

empathize with the emotions uncovered in the interviews. While the impact of the pandemic has created an anomalous situation for the participants as well as my own career, the extent to which each narrative was impacted is dependent on the individual teacher.

I have conducted person-to-person interviews through the use of the application Zoom. Interviewing participants provided insight into their perceptions and experiences regarding teaching prior to and throughout the pandemic (Merriam, 2016). To observe them teaching would not explain their intrinsic thoughts or feelings *about* teaching as they moved from in-person instruction to online, from online to a hybrid schedule, and from a hybrid to a return to in-person over 18 months. I conducted semistructured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were guided by interview questions (see Appendix) that are based on the four research questions for which I wished to gain understanding.

The interview questions (Appendix A) have a variety of question styles that also help in understanding the experiences of my participants. Objective questions ask for specific data (e.g., years teaching, district demographics, and technology supplied) that help to set the scene for the subjective questions regarding perceptions of events. Through a phenomenological lens, the interviews I conducted were a romantic conception (Merriam, 2016; Roulston, 2014). The romantic conception of an interview is based on a warm rapport between the interviewer and the participant where both parties are part of the conversation. The interviewer is part of the conversation, and the pre-existing relationship with the participant can lead to revelations that are only shared with friends and family. My own reflexivity played an essential role in creating a conversation that was revealing for the participant. While I share in the events of the spring of 2020 school closures, my story is different from most participants (excluding Scott) in that I have a Master's degree in multimedia and I was already accustomed to creating rehearsal files and

complex video productions. However, I share in the morphing of relationships with my colleagues and students. I share in the pain of physical separation felt by my friends. I used pseudonyms for my participants and their school districts to further delve into each story without the fear of disclosure. I had planned to ask follow-up questions through email. The interviews were open, raw, and emotional and in that intimate setting, the questions were answered while I watched and heard the pain each participant endured. There were no follow-up emails. I wanted to stay in that moment we shared in the initial interviews. I had to bridle my own emotions and admit that at the end of several (Becky and Matthew) interviews, I found myself crying as I had received validation that my own emotions and experiences were not unique and that I was part of a bigger picture.

Through online interviews, the geographic constraints are no longer an obstacle (Merriam, 2016), provided that the participants have access to the internet. The face-to-face format allows participants to read body language. Visual communication can also help to develop a better rapport than non-visual communication (Archibald et.al, 2019). Another advantage to an online venue is that participants can exit the meeting at any time without physically leaving the space. Finally, the convenience of participating from any location can make participants more comfortable with the process (Gray et. al, 2020).

Each participant's blob of clay was splayed out on the table as we delved into the unfortunate adventure through the pandemic. The individual stories of trauma saw the dough dulling in color or hardening as the pliability was paused with distance learning. My blob of clay was definitely changed. I found that I am ready to explore a new container in which to place my clay and to add new clumps of clay outside of the public K-12 education sector. I was able to refine my online teaching curriculum lexicon. I have arrived at a better understanding of online

teaching. I am open to helping others to transition technologically and leave the safety of my current music position should the right opportunity provide me that clump of clay.

Music, whether singing or playing an instrument, will forever remain my avocation but it need not be my sole vocation. Continuing my education by pursuing a doctoral degree and broadening my horizons has made me feel as if I can leave my harbor and pursue larger aspirations. I feel validated as an intellectual which stands in stark contrast to my perception of the community's impression of the elective, and somewhat superfluous, music teacher.

Data Analysis

Using a whole-part-whole analysis, I looked for themes using hermeneutic phenomenological reflection (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016b 2016a). I also employed interpretive phenomenological analysis and I conducted multiple cycles of codings (In Vivo and focused coding) as I uncovered themes using codes within each category (Table 4). As I analyzed the transcripts and emails, I looked to discover the unique experience of six teachers as they navigated the world of teaching during a pandemic. After participating in the recorded interviews, I used a transcription service to transcribe each interview and reviewed it multiple times to see how the participants shared the experience. I examined how the experiences throughout the pandemic were different and how the experiences before the pandemic helped shape each teacher's narrative. By drawing upon Deleuzoguattarian philosophies, I desired to understand the 'through-ness' of teaching throughout the pandemic. I then returned to the whole text to place themes in context with the existing literature and uncovered similarities across the participants' districts.

When I conducted my pilot study in the spring of 2021, not all schools in Pennsylvania had returned to in-person learning. I asked my participant what was *being* a choral director like

as education shifted to online. I was also able to ask her what her choral program looked like upon the return to in-person learning. It was in the interview that I realized the depth of what an impact the experience had on her perceptions of her future in teaching. It was also through that interview that I refined the categories which I would explore in this dissertation project. The themes led me as I authored the research and subordinate research questions.

As I approached this dissertation research project, I refined my interview questions for the six teachers whom I interviewed (Appendix). I wanted to learn if their experiences echoed my pilot project participants as well as my own experiences. The overarching research question I asked was “What was the experience of choir teachers living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?”. I wanted to learn of what the lived experience of being a choral director during the pandemic was for more teachers so I might be able to begin finding themes. With 23 years of experience and a degree in both music and technology, I sought to discover how my experience was unique from theirs. I also wanted to find if there were unifying themes that we all shared. The uncovering the background of each participant was imperative to understanding and narrating each person’s experiences.

My interview with Matthew was the first interview I conducted. I met Matthew when I was a 14 year old sophomore in high school. Full of bravado, I was too haughty to fully understand the initial music lessons he attempted to teach me. He has known me the longest of all my colleagues and experienced my youthful foolishness. Yet, he chose to look past my adolescent pomposity and accept me as a colleague and friend. Sally’s interview was akin to interviewing close family. We first met in college and are in the same sorority. We are very comfortable in sharing our lives and the interview was just another conversation in a series of conversations we have shared over the years. Becky and I once cohosted a large music festival

many years ago. Becky is driven by passion for teaching and the equality of all students. I admire her advocacy for music and for disadvantaged youth. She is highly introspective and observant. Her interview led to great stories and analogies of the trials and tribulations of the pandemic.

I have been teaching longer than Scott, Evan, and Janet. I remember them as novice teachers at their first festival events. As a more seasoned educator who is most welcoming, I sidled up to each one as a new teacher and introduced myself to them. I invited them to lunch or dinner their first year of teaching and added them to my friend collection. The interviews with them came from the angle that I was once a mentor, and now a friend. They were open and candid.

During the interviews, I tried to bridle my responses. However, once my friends started to become increasingly emotional, I needed to meet them and console them due to our standing relationships. The semi-structured interviews became more informal and we lamented together in our shared emotions of the effects of the pandemic on our programs...programs we all worked years to establish that were now struggling to stay relevant or, as in Becky's case, were eliminated after years of hard work and dedication. Our longstanding friendships made them comfortable to share stories of seeking mental health support or sharing of a burgeoning drinking problem that arose in response to the pandemic. Without this familiarity, I doubt I would have had the same organic conversations.

I narrowed the scope of my research to the themes of technology, relationships, and the process of change. Using ontological inquiry, I explored the participants' reality of teaching throughout a pandemic (Saldaña, 2016). Using Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic reflection, I read the transcriptions of each teacher after the interviews were completed. While I am strongly shaped by postphenomenology, I also looked at the transcriptions through an experiential lens.

According to Adu (2019), an experiential lens employs the perspective based on a phenomenon one is experiencing.

In my first cycle of coding, I utilized In Vivo coding to look for lumps of text that stood out from each of the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). I wanted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of each individual’s story as I acknowledged the multiple realities or multiplicity of each participant (Adu, 2019; Deleuze, 1968). The transcripts were manually coded using Google Workspace’s Sheets. I then returned to the transcripts for my second cycle of coding, I turned to focused coding where I looked to themes that developed within the In Vivo cycle with regards to technology, relationships, and the process of change. I transformed the codes into the following themes within each sub research question:

Table 4

Development of Themes

Research Question	Theme	Codes
Role of Technology	Socioeconomic Inequity	“Free & Reduced Lunch”
	Learning Management Systems and 1:1 Devices	“1:1 Initiative”
		“iPads”
		“Laptops”
		“Google Classroom/Canvas”
Professional Development	Software Availability for Teachers	“Music Composition Software”
		“Video Editing Software”
		“Virtual Choir”
		“Training”
Relationships Affected by Remote Learning	In Loco Parentis	“Mom/Dad”

	Mental Health Check-Ins	“Google Hangouts” “Zoom” “Synchronous Online Learning” “Curriculum”
	Caring Colleagues	“Colleagues” “PMEA”
Changes in Teaching Choir	Mental Health of Educators	“Depression” “Self-Destructive Behaviors” “Lack of Motivation” “Overwhelmed” “Retirement/Quitting”

After journaling my own story for the themes prior to the interviews and then returning to journal my experiences throughout the interview process, I brought the teachers’ stories together. It was imperative that I first journaled without the emotions of others that I could address my own experiences. I then returned to journaling after the interviews to acknowledge the emotions that arose along with my interactions with my peers. I ensured that my participants were both male and female and that they came from districts with diverse backgrounds.

Subordinate question 1, “What role did technology play?” focused on the availability and usability of technology in moving to remote instruction. Each participant was provided with various levels of technology to begin teaching online. The most impoverished districts were not able to provide devices for their students. The lack of technology placed the students of those districts at a distinct disadvantage to their more affluent counterparts. I also asked the teachers

about professional development that had been provided. Having access to technology did not guarantee success. The teachers also needed to have prior professional development in order to implement curriculum through a learning management system. Professional development with technology specifically designed for music education was not provided for any of the participants in this dissertation project. Once each teacher matriculated to online education, each participant found they were in need of additional software and hardware applications. The school districts for each teacher tried to meet the needs of the teacher. The most affluent districts were able to provide new technology while the impoverished districts provided older laptops which were not able to meet the needs of the teacher.

Subordinate question 2, “How did remote learning affect the teacher’s relationships with students and colleagues?” sought to understand the emotional investment of relationships between teachers and students, and teachers with other teachers, were tested throughout the pandemic. I asked my participants about those relationships to determine their personal investment in their careers. *In loco parentis* was the common theme amongst the most seasoned teachers. Being a parent figure was a resounding response from the teachers interviewed. As “faux parents”, the teachers found they were serving in the capacity of mental health care for students who were sequestered in their homes at the height of the pandemic. Finally, I sought to identify the role of relationships with colleagues during the pandemic.

Subordinate question 3, “Upon returning, how do the teachers feel like teaching choir has changed?” asked the teachers to delve into their own changes in perception as to their career. I also asked them to consider the field of music education in the state and in the nation. The themes of frustration and exhaustion were at the forefront of the answers. All the respondents agreed that it will be years before choral programs return to pre-pandemic enrollments.

Due to my reflexivity, I bridled my own experiences to understand the experiences of my participants better. The selected participants come from diverse backgrounds, and I recognize that my story is uniquely my own. While I called upon my relationships with my colleagues to gather intimate information, I also recalled the phenomenological lens of through-ness as each participant tells their own unique story. Bridling “is the process through which post-intentional phenomenologists examine their own intentionalities with the phenomenon, as well as the intentional relationships introduced through the process of conducting research” (Soule & Freeman, 2019). Karin Dahlberg, an avid horseback rider and phenomenological researcher, developed the process of bridling. Just like Dahlberg riding her horse, controlling the speed and direction of a researcher’s judgment requires a bridle (Vagle, 2018). “We bridle understanding so that we do not understand too quickly or carelessly or do not attempt to make definite what is indefinite (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003)” Through bridling throughout my project, I was able to identify my preconceptions and existing assumptions in order that I might better find the essence of the phenomena.

I am entangled in the stories of my participants as I have lived through the pandemic with them as friends. We communicated daily while in full remote instruction. Part of the time, we discussed music pedagogy and technology. However, we often turned to our own personal lives and what it was like to live in seclusion. I maintained a bridling journal in which I acknowledge my own entanglement in order that I might detangle myself to understand the participants' stories without excessive bias.

“After Matthew’s story of the student contacting him at midnight, I knew that our relationships with students were one of the major reasons we entered this career. I had been that student that pushed his buttons years ago and here he was sharing in what is to

be one of the biggest moments in my life. I was myopic as a teenager. The world revolved around me...yet there was this man who was trying to make me a stronger musician and I disregarded him in *his* green-ness as an educator. Today, I heard his passion for teaching and his love for his students and I felt embarrassed for my earlier condescension. I was the youth he was trying to help and, seeing as I was now a colleague and friend, he was successful despite my bravado. I also had students contacting me at all hours of the night asking for help or simply saying they missed me. In this interview, I realized that Matthew forged the path to my current shared interest in student relationships. He made me a better teacher.” (Research Journal, 12-28-2021)

After reading through my bridling journal, I feel grateful for the district in which I work. My district prides itself on being invested in technology.

“Poor Becky! I cannot imagine my life without teaching three choirs a day!! How unfortunate that her district chose to eliminate choir. I sit here crying for her loss. Choir is the ultimate emotional event for my kids. The beauty of harmony makes for kinder, more open-minded people. How to go on in one’s career when the class is discarded by an administration that tosses it to the curb. I couldn’t do it. I have never been more thankful for [my district]. Anything I have requested, any need that arose, they made it happen. My classes, while significantly diminished in size thanks to this hellacious pandemic, are still running and my head principal acknowledged that they know my numbers will recover because kids love me. I have support and this pandemic has oddly made me even more grateful for my administration and district that has placed their confidence in me to right this ship.” (Research Journal, 12-30-2021)

With our 1:1 initiative, my students were accustomed to navigating a learning management system prior to the pandemic. Any technology I have requested has always been purchased for me. As the media teacher, I have an upgraded laptop with the Adobe Suite, Finale for music composition, MIDI keyboards, peripheral cameras, Apple TV...the list goes on. The shift to online learning was not taxing with regards to technology for me. The difficulty was in the change in relationships. I missed interacting with my students in person. The group dynamic is essential in ensemble singing. Without children of my own, my students filled that void in my life. The physical separation was painful.

“Mother’s Day 2020. I got a text message from Nick’s mom, Jill. “What is your address?” Sure enough, Jill was sending Nick to my house and to my mother’s house with flowers for Mother’s Day. Nick was one of the students I called “my faux son”. I had taken him to choral festivals and had him in every class I had taught since he was in 9th grade. He was the boy I wanted as my own son. I am childless. Barren. Teaching kids like Nick was a balm for my lack of children. And here stood this wonderful young man on my porch with a beautiful pot of begonias because I was his “school mom”. Jill calls me “the other mother”. They have become my extended family.” (Research Journal, 12-20-2021)

The pandemic has made me realize that there is life outside of teaching public school. Upon defending this dissertation project, I am no longer solely bound to teaching music and media. The disassociation of my relationships with my colleagues and students has opened the door to changing career paths. Each of the teachers I interviewed had a unique story that was shared. In analyzing my data, I had to recognize my perceptions of the answers in order to fully appreciate each individual story shared.

Confidentiality and Privacy

To ensure the privacy of each interview, it was essential to create an invite with a link that is sent to each participant's email account. This provides a unique link for the meeting that is only held by the interviewer and the participant. I ensured the 'waiting room' was enabled. This additional step ensured that uninvited guests could not enter the interview room. The interviews were recorded and solely viewed by me. In lieu of saving the recordings to the Zoom cloud service, all interviews were recorded to my computer and stored locally on a secure server and an external hard drive to ensure the videos were not compromised. I placed a copy of the interviews on my WVU Google Workspace. Upon the completion of the project, I will keep the videos on the dedicated hard drive in a secure location at my home.

Research Limitations

The qualitative research I have chosen to pursue is limited by time. While six educators from diverse backgrounds started to author the narrative for teachers, the story of being a choral director during a global pandemic is so much greater than the six stories I shared in this paper. I am joining the conversation on behalf of our state as merely a dot on the map that can be added to the existing articles about teaching performance-based courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and reviews that are beginning to emerge from around the globe.

Summary of Method

Through interviewing six secondary choral educators, I aimed to begin to write the story of the lives of music educators as they traversed the landscape of a global pandemic. Through a postphenomenological lens, the interpretive analysis of the interviews served as a springboard to write that narrative through telling each participant's story. While the pandemic is not over and might never end, the teachers have returned to teaching in person. At the conclusion of this

research, I hope to share the results with other choral educators as we start to heal from what I hope is the most tumultuous event ever to befall our educational lives.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This paper aims to take a closer look into the lived experiences of six secondary choral teachers throughout the pandemic. With a postphenomenological lens, I came to the interviews knowing that each teacher would have a unique experience because each teacher works in a different district and has different musical and technological backgrounds. Through sitting down for interviews with my colleagues, I wanted to better understand the individual experiences with technology as they moved to remote teaching. I also wanted to understand the role of relationships with students and colleagues and the impact of the separation. Finally, I wanted to know if the experience of the pandemic had changed perceptions of the future of music education both for the individual teachers as well as for the overall views of music education at large.

The research questions were answered through the lens of my participants. Nodding to my postphenomenological lens, each participant came to the interview with a different background. With varying years of experience and schools with vastly different socioeconomic statuses, the teachers all had different experiences with technology integration and availability. Teachers who were more “tech-savvy” did not necessarily have an emotionally easier time with the pandemic; they simply had fewer struggles to modify their curriculum to the online venue.

In this chapter, I present the themes that emerged from the interviews. My primary question, “What was the experience of choir teachers living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?” is unpacked by three subordinate questions focusing on the role of technology, relationships with students, and changes in teaching practices.

Sub RQ-1: Role of Technology

Theme 1: Socioeconomic inequity was inherent in the chasm between impoverished and affluent districts.

I knew that my interview with Becky was going to be one in which there would be tears shed. Together we mourned the loss of a curricular choral program. The fine arts serve a vital role in education. The humanities help to make our students more human. Music performance teaches students the cultures of the various genres of music. It brings together students from diverse backgrounds to sing cohesively as one ensemble, one sound, one voice. There are relatively no physical barriers to participation in a choral ensemble, and there is no cost to maintain equipment. Becky's district chose to eliminate the expense of fine arts teachers at the cost of epic impact on students' human spirit. While the board of school directors was supportive of performances, the operational budget in a financially-strapped district ultimately led to the demise of the program. Becky is passionate about bringing music to all students and empathizes with the district's plight of being financially strapped.

“I think that one thing I really had to separate myself from just being in a school district that doesn't... Yeah, I don't know. I don't want to say doesn't respect the arts because I do think that the school board does. It's just they just don't understand what that means. I think one thing that's really important is that I just have to identify that when choices are made that really cut back student access to the arts, to music, I just have to know that that wasn't my choice, right, so I can't... Even if I know better, I can't carry that.”

While she understands the financial situation, she is frustrated with the inequity for her students that has come with the elimination of many fine arts classes in her district.

“So they were like, ‘Okay, well, we're not going to have marching band in the fall.’ And even when they laid off these teachers, they said, ‘Oh, but we'll probably call you back in November or December-ish.’ Well, nobody's going to stay around for that. That is little respect they have for... Yeah. I mean, I hate to say that...I mean, can you imagine? I don't know how else to describe it. And I want quality. I mean, that's why I teach public education. I believe in free equal access to quality arts education for students.”

Sally also teaches in a district that is struggling with a high crime rate, a high drop-out rate, and it is at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Sally's students' year was truncated in March of 2020. Her students received laptops in October of 2020; however, they were given directly to the students by the awarding grant company. The district has no control over the devices that were given to the students but has provided internet access for all students enrolled in the district. While Sally reports that many students have used the laptops for learning, there are also students who have sold the laptops and used the income for other purposes.

Both Sally's and Becky's districts were sending home packets of worksheets for students but were not permitted to hold any students accountable for a grade. Both districts scrambled to provide equipment for the 2020-2021 school year, but internet service and transportation shortages still thwarted progress for students. Sally saw the end to her middle school choral program as the district eliminated teachers in an attempt to reduce staffing and stay solvent, while at the time of this publication, Becky was the last remaining music teacher in her district.

“I just found out our middle school band and orchestra director is retiring, and we're worried that they're not going to rehire him and they're going to try and absorb... When I first got hired at [redacted], we had 12 music teachers. Now we have one, two, three,

four, five, six... we have six. So, I could only teach one grade [at the Middle School]. I just taught 8th grade chorus, and the orchestra teacher taught the 6th grade chorus, and the 7th graders didn't have a chorus. Then the next year, imagine since the 7th graders coming up to 8th grade didn't have chorus, I had a handful of kids that year. Then the following year was COVID, and they didn't want me to travel so they just cut it completely. Yeah, so there's no feeder program to my program. Program total, I usually had about 100-150 kids total in my program at the largest. That was with all the different classes that I had. This year, I have 50 total.” (Sally)

The elimination of parts of programs and the personnel who teach in fine arts departments has drastically changed the enrollment in classes.

The programs in socioeconomically disadvantaged districts were not capable of readily providing online learning at the onset of the pandemic. This serves only to expand that divide between affluence and poverty in education.

Theme 2: Learning management systems and 1:1 devices were essential for success.

Google Classroom was a popular LMS option amongst those I interviewed. Google provides Google Classroom free of charge to schools and that makes it a popular choice amongst school districts. While there is a premium tier, the teachers I sat with were all using the free version. There are fewer features available on the free tier; however, it serves its purpose of distributing assignments and creating tests. Janet and Becky are users of Canvas. It is a paid service LMS that has many optional learning tool interoperability (LTI) features that can be purchased by a learning institution. It also has “Canvas Commons” where teachers can share content across all the users of Canvas.

Prior to the pandemic, none of the teachers had professional development using their district's LMS. As for the more affluent districts, they quickly migrated from the brick and mortar to online in March of 2020 while the socioeconomically disadvantaged schools were attempting to mail home packets to every student. The deciding factor in the success of moving online was whether or not the students had access to devices. Schools with a 1:1 Initiative in place had little to no downtime in the transition.

The school in which I work was down for only one day as a transitional day while Becky and Sally lost an entire nine weeks of learning. Becky shared the difficulties her students had with learning in the spring of 2020.

“So kids would need transportation to the school to get that packet... So you see it's all about self-advocacy here, right? That's the thing that's hard to explain. 'You don't understand, this kid has no one to advocate for them. Nobody is going to call the school and say, 'Hey, shouldn't my kid be working? Shouldn't my kid have materials? How do I get this?' Nobody's doing that.' There's just a certain number of kids, a percentage of kids, that just disappear, right? I would argue that some of those kids still have not been found.”

Becky's students did not receive their devices until October of 2020. At the onset of the pandemic, her school had a limited number of Chromebooks available for teachers.

“They [the district] were like, "Well, we have a couple of laptops here if you really need them." The people who got them, they were so old and not useful at all that most of them ended up buying their own materials anyway. I mean, I did. I bought a Chromebook, a higher-end Chromebook with just a slightly faster processor so that I could just video conference, right, just so that I could steadily run Zoom and so that I could use my

desktop computer to edit materials while I was teaching on Zoom. You know what I mean? I'd be editing Google Slides just to keep up while I was teaching on Zoom.”

Sally’s response to available technology echoed that of Becky’s response.

“March 13, 2020, our school district had zero technology, other than kids might have cellphones. That was basically it. I did have a school laptop. Yeah, it was a very old laptop that didn't really run very well. I had a really good friend who tried to help my learn the technology. She was instrumental in getting me the right programs onto my laptop, but the laptop was so slow, the processor wasn't strong enough and it was a struggle. The struggle was real with technology in 2020.”

The theme of socioeconomic inequity’s impact is seen through the lack of technology made available to teachers and students in impoverished districts.

Theme 3: There was no prior professional development provided.

“No. None.” was a resounding statement from the six teachers whom I interviewed when asked if their districts had provided prior professional development in music education or teaching music online. Several of the districts were using a learning management system prior to the pandemic but had received minimal to no training on how to operate the LMS. As an early adopter of the blended learning classroom, I have been using an LMS in my curriculum for assignments and file distribution since 2013. Scott, the technologically savvy teacher I interviewed, had also used an LMS prior to the pandemic as part of his music technology classes. All other teachers interviewed were thrust into the world of teaching online after the onset of the pandemic. I asked Evan about his professional development in online instruction prior to the pandemic. ““Prior to the pandemic?” I would say there was nothing because I don't think anybody in their right mind would have thought anything like this was ever going to happen.”

Matthew's response was even more concise, "This was brand new." Janet echoed Matthew and Evan, "Never had to teach remote. I don't think, has anybody? No, no, definitely not."

Theme 4: Software availability for teachers was pivotal for their success.

While music software was never covered in any professional development opportunities for the teachers I interviewed, all the districts found the means to provide hardware or software for the teachers. I asked my participants would their school districts provide the needed hardware or software if they discovered a need for technology while in remote instruction. Matthew responded, "They bought five licenses or something [of Finale]... I don't even have it on my laptop anymore because, quite honestly, I just don't use it." Janet's district also provided her with software she needed and also purchased it for the entire music department. "So I've always used Smart Music. So then when this happened, I said... I came to them and said, 'Look, I've been using this for years. Get it for everybody, and I'll teach them.' So I was then the teacher that was the professional development." Evan, the teacher in the most affluent district which participated in this study, responded,

"They were offering microphones, they were offering cameras, they were offering document cameras. I had them buy for me. The document camera they got to me was a \$400 camera, and I use it still. Pretty much every day, just projecting it on the television is so huge just for helping kids who are learning to read music and whatever else."

Scott also found he needed video production software in order to create a virtual choir.

"We actually do have access to, I don't think most people know it, but we all have access to the Adobe suite. I just through talking with our AV tech and our building tech, I was able to make sure that I had access to Premiere Pro, and we already have iMovie and GarageBand on our iPads and our MacBooks. They have a self-service app set up on the

devices. So if there's something that would require admin credentials, they can set it up, so that we can just install ourselves.”

Becky’s district paid for an online subscription to a theory application. Despite the spring of 2020 finding no technology available for her cash-strapped district, the fall found the students receiving Chromebooks. Becky found there are many freeware options available to use as a teacher.

“They did pay for the site license for uTheory. And I haven't asked for any other one. CodeHS has a music program, too, and it's kind of on the back of my mind, you know what I mean, to ask for that one. But other than that, nothing is fee-based, and uTheory was free at the beginning of the pandemic so that's when we had picked it up.”

In order to find a customer base, many applications were offering basic free versions of their software at the start of the pandemic. Applications, like Zoom and even SmartMusic, offered basic tier-one services to teachers across the country.

Sub RQ-2: Relationships Affected by Remote Learning

Theme 1: The role of the participants is “in loco parentis”.

“I’m Mom.”

“They call me Mama!”

“I get ‘Dad’ a lot.”

When I asked my respondents to explain their relationships with their students, they quickly identified as a parent. Perhaps it is because choir students usually begin in ninth grade and continue on in the course until graduation, or perhaps it is because the fine arts class structure is more open than a lecture course, but the bond between choir students and their teachers is one that transcends the 720 days of high school. From traveling with students who might never have

the opportunity to see the world to simply singing “Happy Birthday” to each student on one’s special day, there are moments for connections and relationships that are unique to the performing arts classes.

My colleagues who have children of their own found the closure in March 2020 to provide a unique opportunity to spend extra quality time with their children. Both Sally and Janet expressed excitement to be home for the Spring of 2020. “‘I can take a two-week break.’ We were told we were going to have to make it up. It was just going to be a two-week window. We were all like, ‘Woo, see you.’” (Janet) “There was a plus side to it. I got to be home with [my son].” (Sally) Both Janet and Sally were excited for the initial two week hiatus in which they would be home with their children.

I vividly remember a Zoom meeting with my colleagues the day we learned all our schools would not be reopening for the 2020 term. I cried for hours. My friends without children at home, they cried for hours. There is a reason we are called “Mom”, “Maaaaaa”, or “Dad”. We are the in loco parentis. After 720 days of teaching the same students, they become faux children. The pain of separation during the pandemic greatly affected my colleagues, as well as myself. They are our “children”.

Theme 2: Synchronous classes became mental health check-ins.

The schools with technology were able to hold virtual classes online. While attendance was not mandatory for any of the schools interviewed in the Spring of 2020, the synchronous meetings were optional. At first, students were enthused with meeting online. The novelty of the experience made for decent attendance. Scott asked a daily question to get some feedback. I posted to a daily discussion board a silly question so I could keep the lines of communication

open from my home office. Slowly, as the students realized that attendance was optional, the numbers decreased.

The content started as high-quality musical education. By mid-April, all my colleagues agreed it became a mental health check-in for our students who attended. Usually quiet students suddenly were messaging us throughout the day to chat about the banalities of life. As the Spring of 2020 stretched on, the students needed human interaction more than ever.

“I think for a lot of them, I am their person in the building that makes them come to school every day. I have had them tell me that, "You're the only reason I come." It's just that music bond, it makes the day go by faster. It makes it more fun. It makes it more... happy. It lightens the mood when you're down. A lot of our kids are down. A lot of mental health issues with our kids.” (Sally)

“And I think prioritizing mental health for the students became one of my priorities for the school year. That it was more important to me that they're feeling okay. I remember one time back in December, it was like right before break, I said, I want you all to do something for me. I'm going to end the Zoom five minutes early. I want you to walk away from your device. I want you to go out and breathe in some fresh air, go play with your dog, go throw a ball, make a snow angel, do something, just walk away for 10 minutes before you go into your next class. And you've been staring at your machines, you've been staring at this, and we've been working really hard, just go be a person.” (Scott)

“I think that our classes, above all other classes, are the most important to recover and recoup. Because those are the classes that help these kids with their mental health. And I

think the pandemic has ridiculously, obviously, insanely negatively affected these kids. And I have seen more mental health issues than I've ever seen, ever. And it's so sad. And it's very upsetting. We had four, four now, four actual real suicide attempts this year. And two of them are my kids. One of them's still in the hospital. And it's all stuff that I'd be like, "Wait, that kid? No." Not somebody that you would typically think." (Janet)

The full toll of the pandemic might never be truly uncovered as to its impacts on the mental health of the students who were separated from the school environment. Janet's experience with having four students attempt suicide is startling to read. Scott realized the importance of prioritizing the mental well-being of his students as he directed them to take a break and enjoy a moment in nature. Recognizing her role as a music educator, Sally confirmed her role as a touchstone for her students.

In our socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, the school serves as the source for two meals a day. We also provide a safe environment in which the students can learn. Additional resources include mental health counseling, free clothing, and food pantries for our most at-risk students. These supports were altered during the pandemic for our most vulnerable youth.

Theme 3: Colleague relationships were altered with remote learning.

My phone rang at least once a week with a call from a colleague from my building whom I rarely spoke with that frequently in person. An unofficial support group would frequently check in on one another during the pandemic. I would also have colleagues visit my home throughout the pandemic. Without the circle of caring colleagues, I am not sure I would have withstood the perils of the pandemic.

"I would say that it definitely did change relationships in that I think we are, for the most part, all more supportive with each other now. We're supportive of each other. I'm in a

group text with probably eight or nine other teachers, and there are some days where somebody just texts, "I need to vent." Because, let's face it, we're not out of the pandemic and times are still shitty, and when they vent or when I vent everybody is right there responding, "I get you. I hear you. This is what happened to me. And we just need to be there for each other." We're definitely more supportive of one another." (Matthew)

"I think we all understand things a little bit more. I know that we've went into each other a lot and tried to bounce ideas off of each other, maybe more so than we would have in the past." (Scott)

One of the silver linings of the pandemic is the creation of relationships within faculties. Both Matthew and Scott turned to their colleagues for support as they ventured into teaching online and navigated the waters of uncertainty.

Sadly, several of my interviewees feel as if they were quarantined from their colleagues. Faculty lounges, upon return, were closed to faculty, and meetings were moved to online venues. Other than to wave at the next adult on hall duty, faculty members found themselves separated by the pandemic.

"Everybody disappeared. Nobody else existed. I don't know what happened in their lives. The fact that I came back in August with sixth grade but none of the seven through 12 teachers came back, I... My room is in the high school, already down on the end in the music wing. They had furloughed the person beside me. The other two tech teachers were not back. So I was by myself, both literally and... Right? I was literally down at the end of the hallway by myself. I taught one class a day in person. Well, at the end of the day,

I'd have to teach those elementary classes, and it was bizarre, right? It was bizarre.”

(Becky)

Becky was left feeling ostracized from her fellow faculty upon returning in the fall of 2020. Only the elementary students had returned to in-person learning and as an itinerant teacher, she taught one elementary class a day and all other classes were online from her desolate wing of the building.

“I think it started out pretty much strong, like everybody. There's a camaraderie. When in the fall, I think there was a huge frustration, chip on the shoulder, just within the district as a whole, when the district allowed those who needed to work from home to work from home, but required those of us without that to come in. There's certainly the human point of there's this conflict. We know we need to support you, we know you have health concerns, we know this is for your safety, this is fine, but it's also ... It is far harder to come into the building every day and work in the building.” (Evan)

Evan found that the administrative decisions to have some faculty teach in person while others were permitted to teach remotely drove wedges into his faculty's relationships. The stress of teaching through a pandemic with the added concern for personal health created animosity between remote and on-campus faculty.

Sub RQ-3: Changes in Teaching Choir

Theme 1: The mental health of educators was challenged with a shift in paradigm.

“I'm trying to prioritize more mental health things now, because I was realizing that it was taking a mental toll on me with the amount of brain power and emotional power that I was putting into things. And I was just so spent that I physically put on a lot of weight and was feeling unhealthy, and so had to take that the whole summer and just kind of

revamp my whole life and drop 20 pounds and try to prioritize not being at school all the time. I mean, there was a period of time right after I had COVID in November where I was straight up talking about leaving education.”

“At one point you have to become aware of your own mental health, and it was dragging my mental health down. So, I had to preserve...And it's all since the pandemic. I also went through depression. I came home from... last school year, so the whole hybrid year, whatever, I came home and I would lay in bed or lay on the couch and just stare at the ceiling. The Zoloft me is in a much better place than the pre-Zoloft me, and I have never in my lifetime dealt with depression until this.”

“I just sat here in my chair and drank. I realized I was not going back to school and that I had no end to that year. It was ended by the pandemic. So I started drinking. I didn't know what else to do.”

I personally was not in a healthy place throughout the closure. I shared in my friends' pain. I poured myself into work. Closing the door to my home office never prevented me from working somewhere else remotely. I provided trainings for my friends and acted as 24-hour technical support for them. I answered frantic Zoom calls from my bed well after midnight, riddled with pleas for help from my colleagues. My students also bombarded me with messages through our LMS at all hours of the day and night. From my journal:

“I remember April 2020. I just got home for the gym, my respite from the world, and I was guilty of grading discussion boards on the treadmill. Who does that? Why? I did it. Giving one grade a day to kids for attendance purposes was asinine. This was clearly an

attempt of my district to micromanage us once again. I couldn't get away from all that shit. It was omnipresent. I graded in the tub. I graded on the deck. I graded at traffic lights that were red. Holy God! I remember thinking "When will this stop?!?" (Research Journal, 12-20-2021)

Many teenagers worked remotely in the wee hours of the morning, and they assumed - correctly - that I was also working. Setting boundaries was extremely challenging for teachers new to remote instruction.

Summary

After sitting with each of my music colleagues from schools around the area, the major theme that arose was frustration - frustration with technology, frustration with losing relationships with students and dropping enrollments, and frustration that the end of the pandemic is not in sight. Forging new paths after many years of teaching in a brick and mortar setting was daunting. While the youngest of my participants has been teaching for only nine years, none of them had never received professional development to become online teachers and none of them were instructed in online pedagogy in their collegiate pursuits. For those who are employed in disadvantaged schools, the lack of technology left them at a more significant disadvantage when compared to their colleagues in more affluent districts. Finally, the need for their own mental health was called to the forefront as they navigated through the unknown of teaching remotely.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a discussion of the interviews and conclusions drawn from the findings in Chapter 4. The main research question asked “What was the experience of choir teachers living through the COVID-19 Pandemic?” The experiences of choir teachers living through the pandemic were dependent upon several variables. The subordinate themes of technology and relationships permeated the six stories of my respondents. In a postphenomenological sense, each experience is unique to the individual as they entered the pandemic with different backgrounds with regards to technology and in varying states of relationships with students and colleagues. The multiplicities of their stories are unique to their individual experiences, yet as a whole, are recognized as the most trying years in their careers.

Sub RQ1- “What role did technology play?”

For the schools that were already equipped with a 1:1 initiative, technology was able to serve as a lifeline of communication for teachers and students. The embodiment (Ihde, 1990) of the devices became the most readily available means of communication with teachers as students were sequestered in their homes. While students and educators embodied technology through the means of a learning management system, the relationships were torn asunder with the physical distance. The post-phenomenological philosophies accounted for the relationship with technology but failed to reflect upon the human spirit and personal interaction.

With the tools in hand to enable learning at the onset of the pandemic, the students were able to continue on their educational journey while the physical buildings were shuttered. In agreement with the studies conducted by Shaw and Mayo (2021), districts failed to provide professional development in the specialized areas of music technology; however, they did

provide the basic needs to operate the chosen LMS in order that some level of learning could continue for core areas of instruction.

For schools without a 1:1 initiative infrastructure, all learning halted in the spring of 2020. Students lost nine weeks of school and will forever be at a disadvantage to their peers who attended districts that were able to continue moving forward throughout the closures. This serves to widen the gap between the affluent and socioeconomically disadvantaged. While resiliency can find students rebounding from the loss of learning, the students from impoverished districts are at a disadvantage to their peers in districts that continued to offer instruction throughout the closures.

More affluent districts were able to purchase additional technology needs throughout the pandemic. Those same districts hired professionals to create virtual choirs and purchase rehearsal files. The teachers in middle-class districts were charged with creating all rehearsal files and virtual choirs. With no formal training, the middle-class district teachers spent countless hours completing what their affluent counterparts could purchase. Many of them chose not to create their own files, and the students received less performance education than their affluent counterparts. This aligns with the study conducted by Holliman (2021) regarding teachers' attitudes and readiness for using technology within their performance-based classrooms.

Sub RQ2 “How did remote learning affect the teacher’s relationships with students?”

This study suggests that music teachers prioritized mental health support. The teachers in this study did not detail what caused the mental health issues because that was not the focus of the study. Prior studies show that K-12 students are experiencing mental health issues caused by quarantine, loneliness, self-isolation, to name just a few causes. The teachers interviewed identified as “in loco parentis” as to their relationship with students. Remote learning created

barriers to daily interactions with their rosters. A teacher reported an increase in mental health challenges for students is indicative of the impacts of the home quarantines.

In the Spring of 2020, online synchronous meetings were not mandatory for any of the teachers interviewed. At first, these meetings were solely curricular-driven. Once the schools announced their intentions of not returning to in-person learning, these meetings became more socially driven and served as wellness checks for the students who attended. The teachers took on the role of mental health liaisons and “faux parents.” While the teachers realized the importance of relationships as part of the social structure in education, they also gained insight into the importance of their own well-being independent of their daily interactions with students. Aligning with the Uddin and Uddin study (2021), the mental health of the students came to the forefront as remote learning trudged on in the spring of 2020. Teachers also found it difficult to contact and communicate with students in the asynchronous environments (Francom et al., 2021). As revealed by the music teachers interviewed in this study, the bond between choir students and their teachers is very strong. The role of teachers as touchstones for their students was challenged with the physical separation of distance learning.

Sub RQ3: “Upon returning, how do the teachers feel like teaching choir has changed?”

The work-life balance shifted at the onset of the pandemic. My colleagues unanimously agreed that stepping back from directing concerts, taking choral trips, directing musicals, and attending spring events at the school made them realize the importance of nurturing their bodies and minds.

The smaller enrollments come at the price of job security. Upon not singing since 2020, students have scheduled other classes. Some students are in credit recapture as they failed their courses during the 2020-2021 hybrid year. Choir is an elective course, and core courses trump

choir in the scheduling arena. All the respondents' programs are smaller upon the return for the 2021-2022 school term, and Becky's program was cut.

Educational benchmarks were not met during remote learning. The difficulty of choral literature programmed for concerts has been impacted by the pandemic. In more affluent districts that continued online in the Spring of 2020, the literature saw minimal adaptations starting in the in-person 2021-2022 school year; however, in districts where there was an abrupt ending to the year due to a lack of technology, the selections of choral literature have been downgraded to accommodate for the absence of studies in remote learning. The need for remediation - more specifically, musical literacy - has slowed the progress of programs in the more impoverished areas.

Unexpected Findings

The mental health of the students was mentioned in every interview despite the fact that the interviews were specifically designed to learn about the teachers' lived experiences. When asked if there was anything each teacher would like to add that I had not asked, they all turned to the importance of music education and its role in the mental health of students. This validated the importance of relationships with students from the perspective of the teachers.

“I think that's like the biggest part of our job. I do, I mean, honestly. I feel like regardless of whether the kid connects with the teacher or not, if they connect with the music, that's doing something for them in a better place. You know what I mean?” (Janet)

The empathy that each participant feels for the students in their charge is heart-warming. It also serves to explain why my colleagues faced their mental health challenges throughout the pandemic.

Directions for Future Research

Technology and the Socioeconomic Divide

It is evident that students who did not attend districts with 1:1 technology initiatives were at a disadvantage at the onset of the pandemic. Many socioeconomically disadvantaged districts truncated their 2020 school term when the doors were shuttered. The lessons offered that were not made available could be those that make the difference in gaining college entrance or competitive scholarships. While many universities forewent College Board testing as part of their entrance requirements, as they are reinstated the students with those missing months of education are at a major disadvantage. A potential further study might examine the scores' effects on students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools before and after the pandemic shut down regarding gaining admittance and scholarship to higher education. I propose that the chasm between the socioeconomic classes and racial equality has widened and will continue to grow more significant with further educational disadvantages for students who attended schools that were not technologically equipped to deploy a 1:1 initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fine Arts

Performance-based courses at large were impacted by the shift to online learning. While the center of my study is music education, my colleagues in visual arts, family and consumer sciences, and technology education were equally impacted by the sudden shift to online learning. Courses like Pottery or CAD require specialized equipment for students to meet with success. As the schools were closed, fine arts teachers were charged with creating new curricula that accounted for an absence of all materials needed for the course. The core curriculum for reading, math, science, and history could be addressed through lessons deployed on an LMS. The specialized need for non-core classes made teaching online difficult, if not impossible. A study

of fine arts teachers could delve into the difficulties of teaching specialized fields throughout the pandemic.

Implication: Creating Positive Relationships in Online Courses

In order to foster stronger relationships in distance learning, it is imperative that the instructors create opportunities for student interaction as well as maintaining a personal presence in an asynchronous course. Through the use of discussion forums and group projects, it is possible for students to feel a connection to both peers and professors. With well-designed courses that employ the proper pedagogy appropriate for creating interactive online environments, asynchronous courses can foster positive relationships and build the vital connections for a successful and fulfilling academic experience.

Conclusion

“When we were allowed back in the building, it was maybe May of 2020 or something like that. When I walked into my room, kids were working on projects, right? There are posters and markers left out on top of posters. It's so haunting to me. See, that's what gets me because it was like all of those kids just disappeared, right? It was almost this... When you watch a TV show, it's like, "Oh, no. Where did they go," or like, "These people are"... It was like that. It was like time stopped in my room. Like Chernobyl. They absolutely just left their stuff and went. It was so bizarre, and we were told we weren't allowed to tell kids that they were not coming back or that there was a possibility they weren't coming back. We were told specifically to say, "No, I'll see you Monday." They had repainted all the halls, right, at school during this time because they have all the custodians there. So they painted and all kinds of stuff. So you're walking down the

hallway and it feels unfamiliar, and then I opened my door, and then here's a poster with markers laying on it mid-word. You know what I mean? It was so striking.” (Becky)

Returning to schools after the closure was akin to a post-apocalyptic dream. The dystopian months of remote teaching left many teachers at a loss for words. The six teachers I sat down with openly shared their emotional journey throughout the pandemic. While several embraced time with their families, all of the respondents agreed that the students’ mental health was challenged throughout the pandemic. Cleaving students from the school's physical structure exacerbated many of the preexisting mental health issues.

The relationships that are afforded in music classes serve as lifelines to the most at-risk youth enrolled in these vital programs. The role of technology, while it was intended for educational dissemination, turned out to be the sole means to socializing for many students. Students came to online synchronous classes because they were lonely and needed the touchstones that music educators provided. For music educators, the line between teacher and “faux parent” were blurred as unending class periods ticked away in the Spring of 2020.

I asked the participants if they thought that the state of our music programs would recover and if they were able to lead the charge of rebuilding post-pandemic. The tragedy of all six participants is that they, like myself, agree that rebuilding is left to the next generation of teachers. We are tired. We have been beaten by the pandemic. Perhaps this dim outlook will also change with time and distance from the ills that befell my beloved profession. Maybe we will pick up our torches and forge paths once again. The wounds of the past two years are deep, and my colleagues are beleaguered from the calamity of an ongoing pandemic. The true change in my colleagues I interviewed was the deadening of their spirits. Sadly, the culmination of my research is as dystopian as the pandemic itself, and there is no happy ending. We are wiser as a

nation as we begin to realize the importance of public education for our students' mental health. The blow to our educational system will leave ripples for generations to come.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

This appendix contains the questions I will be asking during the interview.

Background

- What is your teaching background? How long have you been teaching?
- Describe your district. Tell me about the demographics of your district and describe your program.
- March 13th, 2020... Tell me about that day.
- What supplies did you take home?
- How long did you think you would be working remotely?
- How did you feel leaving your school that day?
- When you learned you would not be returning in 2020, how did you feel?
- What did your school's schedule look like at the start of the 2020-2021 school term?
- What was your school's stance on singing in-person? What guidelines, if any, were you given?
- How does your environment look currently, have you returned to "normal" or operating with restrictions?

Technology

Availability

- Describe the technology you had to begin teaching online.
- Were your students provided with technology by your school that was permitted to leave campus?
- How did you communicate with your students at the beginning of lockdown?

Teaching Online

- Tell me about your prior experience with teaching online.
- And teaching choral music online, had you ever had to do that before the pandemic?

Professional Development

- What professional development opportunities have you had to prepare you?
- Were any of your professional development opportunities specifically for music education?

Music Technology

- What was your prior experience with music software?
- Prior to the pandemic, was using music technology part of your performance curriculum?
- If you discovered you needed additional technology, did your district provide it and was it capable of handling your needs? If not, how did you adapt?
- Did you attempt to make rehearsal tracks and a virtual choir? Tell me about the experience if you did.

Relationships

Students

- Describe your relationships with your students as a choir director.
- How did moving to online change your relationships with students (if applicable)?

Colleagues

- Thinking about your district colleagues, tell me about your interactions with them prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic.
- Same question...but think about fellow music educators in both your district and neighboring districts.

Changes

- Tell me about your perception of teaching as you returned to in-person learning.
- Thinking about your program in the fall of 2019 compared to today, describe the changes.
- How has the changes in your professional life impacted your personal life?
- Has the pandemic changed your attitudes toward teaching? If so, how?
- In your mind, take a moment to think about the impact of the pandemic on choral programs. How do you think it will affect the future of your program? What about other programs in your area?

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your life as a choir teacher during the pandemic?