

SECONDARY TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES ADAPTING TO THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC

by

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Dedicated to all teachers.

## **DEDICATION**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	ix
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Student Engagement .....	1
Social Context .....	4
Significance of the Study .....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Research Question .....	8
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
Student Motivation .....	9
Purpose of Student Engagement .....	11
Methods of Engagement .....	13
Teacher Perceptions of Student Engagement .....	16
III. RESEARCH METHODS .....	20
Method .....	20
Interviews .....	21
Positionality .....	23
Participants .....	24
Trustworthiness .....	26
Delimitations .....	27
IV. FINDINGS .....	29
2020-2021 School Year .....	29
2021-2022 School Year .....	31
Lowered Expectations .....	33
District Expectations .....	36
Teacher Satisfaction .....	39

V. DISCUSSION .....	43
Teacher Agency .....	45
Agency and District Expectations .....	47
Student Motivation and Lowered Expectations .....	48
Teacher-Student Relationships .....	50
Strategies .....	52
VI. CONCLUSION .....	56
APPENDIX SECTION .....	59
REFERENCES .....	67

## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic (“the pandemic”) forced many public schools in the United States to switch from an in-person learning modality to a simultaneous online and in-person learning modality during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. In this study, I conducted two interviews with four teachers who experienced this transition and asked them questions regarding their responses to the pandemic and how their strategies impacted their ability to engage students. An analysis of the interviews revealed that the policies the teachers were operating under influenced their satisfaction as educators and in turn affected their ability to successfully engage students. All teachers discussed their satisfaction with the approach their school districts took going in to the 2020-2021 school year, when teachers in these districts were expected to prioritize forming positive relationships with their students and explore ways to successfully engage them. However, in the 2021-2022 school year, two of the teachers who worked in the same multi-high-school district expressed their dissatisfaction with their districts’ shift in priority to be more evaluation-oriented and “check list” based, which negatively impacted teacher agency. This study’s findings showed a drastic difference in teacher satisfaction between the school districts, with teachers who worked in schools that maintained teacher-student relationships as their priority having an overall higher satisfaction with the way their schools enabled them to navigate their new terrain. Future research may aim to investigate the relationship between school districts’ approaches to teacher evaluation and teachers’ satisfaction.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Student engagement is a critical part of teaching and is connected to many facets of education. Facets such as student disposition, academic performance, and mental health can be tied to what happens in a classroom (Castro & George, 2021; El-Sayad et al., 2021; Moore, 2021). These facets were affected during the 2019-2020 school year by the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, or “the pandemic,” at which time teachers' engagement strategies were affected by a transition to an online learning modality with little to no time to prepare (Chukwuemeka et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2020). For many teachers, the lack of preparation exposed a low level of experience with digital learning platforms and a need to actualize strategies to better engage students (Alhat, 2020). Several factors made this low level of experience with digital learning platforms difficult for students and teachers alike, with several schools facing a significant decrease in student engagement that led to lower satisfaction with their education (Castro & George, 2021). This is important, because as students become disengaged, their academic outcomes in the form of their grades and attitudes towards learning can decline (El-Sayad et al., 2021). Therefore, this study included various components of the schema of student engagement in an effort to examine how these components interact with one another and, most importantly, how they affect education.

### **Student Engagement**

Scholars define student engagement in various ways. In their classic definition, Robert S. Lockhart and Fergus I. M. Craik (1990) described cognitive engagement in psychological terms, as a process in which shallow, or early, understandings influence later, or deeper understandings in students. Greene (2015) also took a psychological

educational approach when discussing student engagement, referring to it as a broad term that involves a process by which learners identify the information they are learning, identify a strategy to learn, and put forth the effort needed to learn the information.

Greene (2015) argued that previous definitions of student engagement are heavily focused on a student's own cognitive capacity to put effort into their education. This can be considered a problematic definition because it does not take into consideration what outside factors may influence students' capacity to put effort into their education. Some scholars consider student engagement as an investment that is made when students' needs are met, their strengths are celebrated, and their classroom experiences are positive, rather than a being a skill a student either does or does not have (Broadband et al., 2021). In fact, a student's overall experience and satisfaction with their education can weigh heavily on their decision to continue their studies, if impediments should arise (Tani et al., 2020).

Lockhart and Fergus Craik (1990) have a wide-reaching influence when it comes to student engagement. The interpretation of their research varies depending on the lens of the researchers citing their work on cognitive memory theories. Some researchers such as Greene (2015) used a flexible definition of engagement that incorporates motivating factors and different strategies and preparations made by teachers. Similarly, Ravindran et al. (2005) have also interpreted the work summarized by Lockhart and Craik (1990) in a manner that depends on understanding students' unique approaches to learning and ensuring their satisfaction, rather than basing their engagement on an ability that they either do or do not have.

Although early research on student engagement arguably focused on a discussion

of cognitive memory skills and hierarchies of information (Lockhart & Craik, 1990), it has evolved to include “student-centered” approaches that address the instructor's role in fostering student engagement and the ways that students' happiness with their institution impacts their education (Exeter et al., 2010; Kuh et al., 2008; Tani et al., 2020). Some studies have focused on the relationship between instructor preparation and student engagement, discussing the importance of meeting student needs and allowing them to engage with material in ways that best match their strengths (Exeter et al., 2010; Greene, 2015; Kuh et al., 2008). According to Maxwell-Stuart and Huisman (2017), in some settings, if students do not feel that their instructor creates an atmosphere of belonging, they can begin to feel apathetic towards their education. In fact, the more a student feels that they have a voice in the values of their classroom, the more motivated they can be to engage in the activities led by the instructor (Shi et al., 2021).

Greene's (2015) work drew from the research of Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986), who discussed student engagement in terms of “self-efficacy,” or a student's ability to take control of their needs as a learner. The present study is framed instead in the concept of student agency, which is more related to student intentions than ability (Taub et al., 2019). Agency differs from self-efficacy in that the research surrounding self-efficacy argues that while it can be trained and improved, self-efficacy is part of a student's academic repertoire (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986; Zimmerman, 2000). Research on student agency has tended to focus on aspects of education such as needs being met, satisfaction with education, and student-centered learning (Mameli et al., 2020; Taub et al., 2019). Bandura (2000) argued agency is “rooted in the belief in the power to make things happen,” (p. 22).

For the purposes of the study described in this thesis, student engagement was tentatively defined as students' willing interaction with course materials (e.g., class activities, discussions, homework assignments, conversations) in any capacity as a result of successful motivation from their teacher (Tani et al., 2020). In other words, student engagement occurs when teachers motivate students to grow their early understandings of concepts as defined by Lockhart and Craik (1990), but also takes into consideration individual student needs as discussed by Greene (2015). This study focused on how teachers acted to promote student engagement with their course materials during distance learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how teachers perceive that the transition will influence their student engagement strategies moving forward, while acknowledging that teacher and student share the responsibility of student engagement.

### **Social Context**

To better understand student engagement, it is important to consider what outside factors could contribute to students' participation and motivations with their education (Greene, 2015; Lockhart & Craik, 1990; Ravindran et al., 2005). For this reason, to better comprehend what motivated teachers in their preparation to engage students, it is important to understand how teachers adapted to the many outside factors impacting students' engagement during the academic years being studied (Broadbent et al., 2021). For example, students' mental health became central to the discussion of the impacts the pandemic was having on education. During the first part of the pandemic that covered the ending of the 2019-2020 school year, many students experienced psychological distress and elevated levels of stress (Faisal et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Moore, 2021).

Faisal (2021) discussed how even early in the pandemic students in Bangladesh

began to feel more depressed and anxious. Moore (2021) also discussed how teachers in the United States had a challenging time identifying symptoms of depression and anxiety due to the nature of online learning, and not being able to identify the students' symptoms as they might in person. According to Moore, teachers' intervention strategies for students suffering from psychological distress were less effective in an online setting. Therefore, along with respecting racial identities, teachers were also concerned with how to address issues of students' mental health while adapting their engagement strategies to an online learning modality.

Although this study investigated teachers' experiences engaging their classes in an online learning modality, it is important to consider that teachers and students both experienced many social, political and economic challenges as a result of the pandemic, which could have informed their perceptions. Essentially, teachers began the school year with students who were experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Furthermore, teachers were unable to rely on the approaches they were accustomed to with in-person learning, which could have had an impact on the way in which they engaged in their classes and the way in which teachers perceived their approaches to student engagement.

### **Significance of the Study**

After transitioning to the online classroom, if students were successfully engaged, their grades were more likely to improve from previous grading periods (Clark et al., 2021). In fact, with the employment of effective engagement strategies some students did better in terms of academic outcomes, compared to their previous work (Clark et al., 2021; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Kanik, 2021; Venton & Pompano, 2021). Similarly, if

teachers were provided proper organizational strategies and institutional support, their transition to distance learning made it easier for them to thoughtfully engage their students (Iglesias et al., 2021; Peña et al., 2021). However, not all teachers were provided with this support going into the transition to the online classroom. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers lacked the confidence to successfully engage their students online (Gyampoh et al., 2020). One challenge that teachers faced was maintaining student engagement for extended periods (Khanna & Kareem, 2021). Some students believed that their teachers' virtual lecture format worsened their education, and as a result were unable to engage meaningfully with their classes (Chen et al., 2020).

Similar to teachers, not all students had the same experience during the transition. Some students had the resources (e.g., internet access, computers, stable home life) that they needed to be able to meaningfully engage with their online classes and therefore saw an increase in their academic outcomes (Kanik, 2021). Other students lacked these resources, and consequently struggled to engage with their classes causing a decline in their academic outcomes (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021). As their academic outcomes decline, students can become less motivated to do their work in their classes causing a vicious cycle and making it more difficult for them to improve their academic outcomes and escape the lack of motivation caused by low academic performance (McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019). Essentially, teachers and students transitioned into an online learning modality without much preparation, and students saw a decline in their academic outcomes, which in turn made it more difficult for them to feel motivated to engage with their classes.

The aim of the study presented in this thesis was to better understand the ways in

which teachers were affected by the abrupt transition to an online learning modality and how teachers adapted their strategies to address multiple influencing factors. This could mean that teachers were more sensitive to students' home lives and the availability of resources when assigning homework, or it could mean that teachers created more active lessons that included strategies that they utilized during as a result of the changes caused by the pandemic. My motivation behind seeking secondary teachers' experiences regarding student engagement came from an observed lack of literature regarding this strand of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the research regarding education and the pandemic has focused on post-secondary students' and teachers' perceptions of student engagement and seems to show that the pandemic affected both students' and teachers' perceptions of student engagement in some way (Castro & George, 2021; El-Sayad et al., 2021; Kanik, 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Many studies about teacher perceptions of student engagement that were published prior to the beginning of the school year focused on the ending of the spring 2020 semester and failed to take into consideration the preparation that schools may have undertaken in the summer of 2020 (Gyampoh et al., 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Alhat, 2020). The aim of this study was to better understand secondary teachers' experiences with engagement strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focused specifically on secondary schools that offered an online learning modality during the 2019-2020 and subsequent school years.

## **Research Question**

This study was initially guided by the following question:

- How did secondary teachers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic affect their student engagement practices in schools that transitioned to an online learning modality?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of the related literature yielded four stands of student engagement: student motivation, the purpose of student engagement, methods of student engagement and teacher perceptions of student engagement. The purpose of the following sections is to provide a framework for examining the study's relevance and nuances between topics.

Although these strands touch on different components of student engagement, they all focus on how the strand informs practices and perceptions of student engagement. Upon review of the literature surrounding student engagement and teacher strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, I observed a significant gap in the educational setting of the participants of the studies. I also observed a lack of studies that focused on secondary level students in the United States. Few studies have examined the impacts that the pandemic had on the secondary educational setting in terms of teachers' and students' strategies for engagement.

### **Student Motivation**

Researchers have conceptualized student motivation as the inspiration that students use to guide themselves through goal-centered coursework (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). Earlier research on motivation conducted by McClelland (1985) described motive and incentive as the most important indicators of how often and how well people accomplish certain goals. McClelland described motivation as a part of an equation for the successful completion of goals and, similarly to Bandura (2004), argued that motivation is as important to accomplishing goals as perceived outcome expectations, personal value of goals, and the purpose behind completing the goal. McClelland suggested that highly valued personal goals are at the core of motivation, and that these

goals provide a guide to achievement. Essentially, student motivation has a considerable influence on student engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic widened concerns for students' overall mental health, as their motivation to engage with their schoolwork was impacted by information delivery (e.g., remote learning through Zoom) and instructional quality (Smith et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2021). Daniels et al. (2021) argued that the transition to remote learning at the beginning of the pandemic had a severe impact on university student motivation. These researchers discussed how college students described their outcome expectations as lowering as a result of their goal values and overall lower engagement. Alawamleh et al. (2020) discussed the impact of these changes on students at a university in Jordan, proposing that students' motivation was also significantly lowered. As a result of students' lack of motivation, the researchers argued that students prefer in-person learning to remote learning. Similarly, Aboagye et al. (2020) found that university students in Ghana preferred an in-person learning modality as the pandemic steered their priorities towards their own well-being and that of their families.

A connection exists among student motivation, engagement, and satisfaction with learning. Obiosa (2020) affirmed that when students are highly motivated and meaningfully engaged, their satisfaction with their education can be enhanced. Tasgin and Coskun (2018) also discussed a positive correlation between attitudes towards learning and academic motivation, similarly to the results of Obiosa (2020). In other words, when students are meaningfully engaged, they have higher academic motivation. When they have higher academic motivation, they have a higher possibility of having a positive attitude towards their education. This is important because as these three

concepts correlate with each other, they also have a positive correlation to higher academic outcomes and to better teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2021).

### **Purpose of Student Engagement**

According to the current literature, student engagement relates to many prominent theories of learning. In Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, a person with more expertise on the material engages with students to grow their competencies (Armstrong, 2015). In humanistic learning theories, students engage in positive, empathetic relationships with their teachers (Purswell, 2020). In constructivist theories of learning, teachers provide a “student-centered” environment that allows the students to engage with material and construct their knowledge (Xu & Shi, 2018). Social learning theories highlight students observing others engaging with material, which models engagement strategies (Ahn, Hu, & Vega, 2019). In experiential theories of learning, learning happens through engaging with the processes in a hands-on way (Smith & Rayfield, 2017). While these theories involve various psychological concepts that distinguish them from one another, student engagement can be considered as a crucial component of these theories. Lau (2019) argued that teachers who take time to learn pedagogical theories through trainings and professional development often find it easier to design engaging activities and understand their students' needs.

Roorda et al. (2021) found that elevated levels of student engagement among elementary students in grade levels three through six correlated positively with good teacher-student relationships and academic outcomes. The study, which focused on students on the autism spectrum, also found negative correlations between conflict and engagement, reinforcing the claim that positive relationships are influenced by student

engagement. This claim is supported by the findings of Martin and Collie (2019), who studied the impacts of positive teacher-student relationships in high schools in Australia, and Edwards et al. (2021), who studied the factors of student engagement in an undergraduate course in Canada that used blended learning. Nakamura et al. (2020) described engagement as having a heavy influence on positive teacher-student relationships formed through providing student choice in classroom activities. The authors found students at a Thai university who successfully engaged in this way saw a significant effect on their behavioral, social and emotional engagement. Similarly, teacher accessibility has also been shown to correlate with student engagement (Tan, Small & Lewis, 2020; Zilvinskis et al., 2021). Essentially, students who spend more time engaged with their coursework facilitated by a teacher with whom they have a good relationship with have higher academic outcomes than students who do not (Bakhsae & Hejazi, 2016).

Current literature shows that student engagement has a direct influence on not only academic outcomes but overall student satisfaction with their education (Martin, 2018). In their qualitative study, Mullins and Panlilio (2021) observed that higher student engagement among students 11 to 19 could lead to an improvement of academic outcomes. Similarly, Leino et al. (2021) discussed undergraduate psychology students' engagement at a London university and the impact on academic outcomes when using tools of a virtual learning environment (VLE), such as Blackboard Learn and Canvas, which allow students to self pace using online resources. The results of this study showed a positive correlation with academic outcomes and hours spent using the VLE tools. Similarly, other studies have shown the usefulness of self-paced learning (Cleary et al.,

2020; Kanaparan et al., 2019) while others (Crowley-Cyr & Hevers, 2021; Ghaffari, 2021) have shown that collaborative learning increased academic outcomes. This variety in approaches implies that there is not one way to achieve student engagement, but that prioritizing it can lead to higher academic outcomes for students.

### **Methods of Engagement**

The concept of the “student-centered” classroom is a highly researched approach to student engagement, which involves students building skills together by collaborating on tasks facilitated by an instructor (Dolezal et al., 2018). Part of having a student-centered classroom includes allowing and developing students' agency, which has been considered to be a direct predictor of student achievement (Olivier et al., 2019). In order to establish student agency, one might think that a certain level of rigidity is necessary. Having a highly structured class protocol has shown to improve student engagement and create an inclusive environment (Beck & Roosa, 2020; Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Part of this highly structured protocol could benefit from incorporating student-centered techniques that allow students to establish good relationships (Mikami et al., 2017). However, Adair and Colegrove (2021) challenged the notion of a necessary “high structure,” observing a first-grade class that followed a flexible structure that fomented student agency and engagement.

Ribeiro et al. (2019) discussed the incorporation of reflection as being beneficial to student engagement at a medical school in Brazil, in that when students are given an opportunity to reflect on their processes it increases their engagement with the material and even improves their overall outcomes. Miller et al. (2019), however, studied the relationship between completion deadlines and student performance in a large American

university. The authors argued that setting strict deadlines is detrimental to student engagement, so having a balance of structure and flexibility could be considered a successful way to invoke student agency and therefore implement a student-centered classroom, increasing engagement and student achievement.

High student engagement has also been positively correlated with Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) strategies, where students work together on assignments, provide each other feedback, and develop professional and social skills (Crowley-Cyr & Hevers, 2021). One way to implement PAL is for teachers to select student leaders to help guide groups of their peers through assignments and activities, which can be more effective than in-person instructor-led delivery (Kalpana et al., 2020; Siddiqi et al., 2020). Jawhari et al. (2021) studied the effects of PAL strategies on clinical research skill among medical students at a university in Saudi Arabia. The authors argued that schools should do more to prepare students for these peer-teaching roles, as most students prefer PAL strategies. In pre-service teacher education, such strategies can be effectively used to prepare students for a career of education (Burgess et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, PAL strategies were an approach teachers used to engage students with their online course material. Ala et al. (2021) found that among university students in China and Nigeria, particularly those who lacked the resources to attend synchronous classes, asynchronous PAL strategies helped them successfully engage with their online classes. Similarly, other findings imply that students working in closely knit collaborative groups tend to have higher satisfaction with their education (Ellis & Han, 2020). However, PAL strategies can also come with certain challenges. According to Liebeck-Lien and Sjølie (2020), who studied Norwegian secondary

teachers' use of student collaboration strategies, teachers can struggle with creating effective collaborative activities due to external factors such as student preparedness, willingness to work with others, and student conflicts.

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) is the process in which students organize their own behavioral, cognitive and motivational components of learning (Li & Lajoie, 2021). SRL strategies can be viewed as aligning with the values of constructivist theory of educational psychology, where students construct knowledge for themselves through experiences (Mayombe et al., 2020), and are driven by student self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). It is important, however, to elaborate that student self-efficacy as described by Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986) is expected to be developed by the teacher through tasks that require self-regulation. Through this lens, students are taught to communicate their needs and accomplish goals in ways that work best for them. Essentially, students are provided with materials they must engage with and synthesize themselves at their own pace, and in this way customize their education to best fit their particular learning process.

In the evolution of SRL research, Zimmerman (2000) refined his original research to later define SRL as being a process that begins with an introduction of the proper way of performing a skill and leads to students self-regulating these skills. In practice, students are trained in goal setting, help seeking, time management, self-evaluation, and strategic planning (Cerón et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers divided their online classrooms to have synchronous PAL time and asynchronous SRL time (Rehman & Fatima, 2021). However, there was no focus on the development of skills to self-regulate. According to the current literature, in some cases these

synchronous and asynchronous SRL strategies can increase cognitive engagement and academic outcomes (Kim et al., 2021; Theobald, 2021). However, Estévez et al. (2021) have found that SRL can lead to mismanagement of time and resources and to student disengagement among primary students. Broadbent et al. (2021) have explained that teachers must build university students' self-confidence and cater their learning in a way that nurtures their strengths in order for students to be motivated to engage with SRL methods.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Student Engagement**

Schools that transitioned to an online learning modality because of the COVID-19 pandemic had teachers who were concerned with how they would be able to keep their students engaged (Al-Freih, 2021). The change led to an increased emphasis on the availability of the instructor for consultation (Büdy, 2020). As student engagement fell, student engagement quickly became a critical component for teachers to make it through distance learning (Crompton et al., 2021). Previous studies have found that teachers perceive student-engagement strategies to be important (Bollinger & Martin, 2018). Caddell and Newell (2019) observed that one of the most important predictors of academic performance among students at the United States Military Academy was teachers' fostering of student engagement. Consistent with these results, Venton and Pompano (2021) found that students at the University of Virginia were more likely to achieve higher academic outcomes when successfully engaged, suggesting that student engagement is a significant part of teachers' approaches to education.

Finding effective engagement strategies can be stressful to teachers, as many perceive their approach is the main cause of their students' success or failure (Royaei et

al., 2020). Some teachers in the in-person classroom have begun to identify lectures as inefficient ways of delivering classroom material (Chaona, 2020). To this point, Ghasemi (2021) found that effective classroom techniques heavily influence the quality of teacher-student relationships throughout middle schools in Iran. However, Mullet et al. (2016) found that teachers of in-person classrooms feel unprepared to replace lecture with creative alternatives. Through an extensive review of related literature, Mullet et al. argued that teachers' opinions of engagement strategies in their classrooms are often uninformed by theory or research, suggesting perhaps that better professional development opportunities be available to teachers to better foster student engagement. In pursuit of interactive engagement, teachers have been found to have positive perceptions of technology use through game-oriented lessons and have even seen improvement in academic outcomes with such strategies (Huizenga et al., 2017), and that some teachers have begun to consider technology such as laptop computers as vital tools to be able to provide students feedback, engage students with class materials, and even manage classroom behavior (Wilson et al., 2021).

Previous research has argued that many teachers believe putting their coursework online has a positive influence on their students' outcomes (Alshraideh, 2021). They also believe that a vital component of teaching online is creating and communicating clear expectations to students (Blaine, 2019). In relation to communicating clear expectations, teachers have perceived agency as important to students' success in an online class (Barberà et al., 2016). Similarly, Broadbent et al. (2021) discussed that teachers had more success engaging students when they employed agency tools. These concerns have been interpreted as an implication that teachers must prepare themselves to be able to

successfully teach online, as they often have misconceptions of what it entails (Barbour & Harrison, 2016). According to Hung (2016), teachers in Taiwan believe adequate preparation and support by the administration is the most important in terms of successfully engaging students in an online classroom. Similarly, Li et al. (2018) argued that teachers in China felt their training for administering online classes heavily influenced their daily activities in a positive way. Some teachers even believe that when done properly, distance learning is more effective than the in-person classroom (Manegre & Sabiri, 2020). This finding is supported by Iglesias-Pradas et al. (2021), who asserted that when teachers in Spain felt they were able to successfully engage students in their online classes, they saw improvements in their academic outcomes from their pre-COVID performance.

In the online classroom, one strategy teachers considered to be potentially more effective at engaging students was a blended learning approach, which is an adaptation of the flipped classroom for distance learning (Al-Freih, 2021). Despite this success, Alsarayreh (2020) found that many secondary teachers also believed that having a plan to implement in-person classroom strategies in the event of blended learning strategies had a negative impact on student engagement. Johnson et al. (2020) described how during the early days of the pandemic, many teachers in the United States believed reducing work volume would make the transition easier for students. Another common priority among teachers was to make course material easily accessible to students online for asynchronous SRL-oriented activities (Khafaga, 2021). Many teachers, especially those in rural areas, considered the transition to distance learning to be incredibly challenging (Aulia & Batubara, 2021). In the literature a common theme has been teachers' readiness

for the transition to the online classroom. Teachers who felt well supported by their institutions to implement distance learning saw their students' engagement and outcomes improve (Iglesias et al., 2021), while others believed more preparation will be needed for teachers to be able to successfully create student-centered online classrooms (Priyadarshani & Jesuiya, 2021). Despite the challenge this preparation entails, a majority of teachers have been willing to work with their schools' administration to get training and overcome the difficulties in engaging their students in an online classroom (Yang, 2020).

### **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **Method**

The present study explored teachers' experiences as they transitioned to an online learning modality as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also included teachers' pre-COVID-19 strategies (their past experiences) to contextualize the strategies used when they transitioned into the online classroom. For this reason, participants were teachers who worked at schools that transitioned to online during the 2019-2020 school year and had an online option for students during the school year. I purposely selected four participants using a combination of criterion and convenience sampling. These sampling methods allowed me to select participants in my professional network who met a specific set of criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria included one year of teaching experience prior to the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, and current employment as a classroom teacher. I posted an advertisement for participation on my Instagram account where I “follow” professional contacts and they follow me back (see Appendix E).

On this platform, my profile is public, and I allowed other users who follow me to share research recruitment information on their profiles as well in order to have more reach. I selected the first four teachers who expressed interest, who met the criteria, and who taught different subjects from the others. There was no financial compensation for neither me nor the participants. I invited the selected participants through an email sent using Texas State University email (see Appendix E), with the description of research participation, participant qualifications, and consent form (see Appendix C) were included. If the teachers decided to participate, they gave verbal consent at the beginning

of each recorded Zoom interviews.

### **Interviews**

Data were collected using two interviews scheduled one week apart, designed to allow participants to engage in thoughtful dialogue regarding their experiences with engaging students during the pandemic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). I conducted and recorded the interviews on Zoom and each interview took approximately 45 minutes. Participating in two semi-structured interviews allowed participants an opportunity to reflect on, amend, and clarify any part of their original responses. The goal of the first interview was to discuss with participants what their pre-pandemic student engagement strategies were and establish the atmosphere of the participants' classrooms and work environments (including school and district policies) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. After the first interview, participants had one week to reflect on their answers. I gave no additional reflection activities to the participants.

The first interview focused on pre-pandemic teaching strategies to contextualize the main focus which was the strategies teachers used once they transitioned to online learning. I asked questions in an open-ended format to engage participants in a discussion that added a unique perspective to the current understanding of the transition to distance learning (Saldaña, 2011). The interview questions (see Appendices A & B) attempted to discover how participants' student engagement strategies changed as a result of school closures and the transition to online learning, and how these changes inform their future student engagement strategies. In the event of further information being needed, I contacted the participants via email to schedule a follow-up interview. The purpose of the second interview (see Appendix B) was to unpack the reflection activity and better

understand teachers' specific engagement strategies during their time teaching in an online learning modality.

After I completed the interviews, I transcribed some of the interviews myself and used a transcription service for others. I analyzed them using pattern and category construction to identify categories within the transcripts and isolate patterns within them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2011). Categories were identified by using color-coded labeling of excerpts from the interviews. Once categories were identified, I cross-analyzed the interviews to create connections using pattern construction. The categories emerged as themes in the findings, and patterns also were informed by relevant literature. This approach to data analysis suited this study because it facilitated the tracking and organization of the “raw” qualitative data, particularly when finding themes in transcripts from several interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, before submitting the study, I provided each participant with a copy of the findings and discussion chapters. This step served as a form of member checking to verify the findings. The participants were able to approve of their contributions to the study and ensure accuracy of their comments from their interviews. The participants were able to submit their changes through a Zoom meeting or email correspondence. Many of the questions that I asked turned into passionate discussions, in particular questions regarding the districts' responses to a return to in-person learning during the 2021-2022 school year. For this reason, member checking was an effort to ensure that what the teachers said was what they meant and wanted included in the study. Similarly, the decision to have one week between interviews was in anticipation of passionate answers that could evolve over time after they were discussed.

## **Positionality**

I am currently in my last semester of my Master of Arts degree at Texas State University. I began this program in the fall of 2019 and worked as a teacher in a high school located in the same school district as Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez throughout the entire process. At the time of this study, I was completing my fifth year as a high school teacher. The need for this study occurred to me in the beginning of the pandemic when my school district had an unclear set of guidelines for teachers to follow as we were forced to move our classes online. During the summer of 2020, I worked with many of my colleagues in an effort to ensure our transition to the online classroom went smoothly. Through this process, I was able to see a unique moment in history where teachers were in charge of navigating unfamiliar terrain with only vague limits from the district such as offering the option for students to come in person, stating synchronous and asynchronous policies, and offering teachers different mandatory observation options, allowing teachers to have only one observation for the entire 2020-2021 school year.

In my personal experience, teachers' transition to an online learning modality fomented in me a desire to understand other teachers' experiences with this transition as well as the impacts it may have had on strategies and outcomes. When I first began to design my thesis research in the fall of 2020, I originally wanted to focus on the specific strategies that teachers used to engage their students during the pandemic and the transition to the online learning modality. However, as the interviews took place, I began to take more interest in the actual experience of the participants as they navigated different challenges throughout the pandemic. As a result, the research question that

guided this study evolved to focus on the elements that influenced the ways in which teachers responded to the pandemic, and how these elements affected their overall satisfaction as well as their ability to engage students.

### **Participants**

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, I have given the participants pseudonyms that match their gender identities.

**Mr. Montemayor** was a high school teacher in the social studies department of a large high school in Central Texas. He had 14 years of teaching experience and fulfilled a leadership role on their campus as well as a teaching position. At the time of this study, he was working in a large, multi-high-school district in an urban setting with a majority of their students were being considered “economically disadvantaged” by their school district. Before the pandemic, Mr. Montemayor discussed how he enjoyed unique and informative professional development sessions with his colleagues and discussed a deep appreciation of working with other teacher who truly cared about all students. He described student engagement as a “mood” that went beyond something you can put on a “checklist,” but rather a feeling one gets in a classroom when the teacher activates a level of genuine curiosity in the students and fosters an investment in their own education. He also stressed that an effective educator and observer could feel the “air of engagement” regardless of the subject of the lesson being taught.

**Ms. Ramirez** was a high school science teacher with five years of teaching experience at the time of the study. She worked in the same school district at Mr. Montemayor, but at a different high school with an urban setting. Ms. Ramirez defined student engagement as an energy students had when they were not just on task but

wanting to be on task. Similar to Mr. Montemayor, she used the term “curious” when describing the attitude of an engaged student. When discussing how she measured student engagement prior to the pandemic, she discussed circulating in the classroom, seeing students “maskless” expressions, checking in on individual students and being able to connect with their moods by physically observing them in that way.

**Ms. Madrigal** was a high school teacher in the Language Other Than English (LOTE) department of a high school in Central Texas. She had five years of LOTE teaching experience. At the time of this study, she was working in what she identified as a small district with one high school in a rural area. Ms. Madrigal discussed student engagement as being something that is not easily measured, but rather being more active. Her definition differed from other participants by including the application of the information being learned. Essentially, she discussed student engagement as a process by which students actively apply their knowledge and interact with the information they learn. Aside from the transition to the online classroom, Ms. Madrigal described a certain level of consistency in the policies of her school district prior to, during, and after the transition to the online classroom. She described her lessons as having more “fluff,” or non-essential information to them before the pandemic led her and her colleagues to focus on what the students “really need to know.”

**Ms. Jones** was also working in a school district, which she identified as small with one high school. She was a sports coach and inclusion teacher for a LOTE class during her transition to the online classroom and had 16 years of experience in education, mostly with sports coaching. At the time of the pandemic, Ms. Jones was a teacher in the alternative education program at her school, as well as head coach for a sports team at the

school. She described her engagement strategies in her teaching position as largely motivational for students who were commonly upset to be in the alternative education program. She described how prior to the pandemic, her strategy to engage students was by slowly warming them up through social interaction. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, however, she took on a diverse set of responsibilities as her school navigated the challenges of offering on campus learning as well as an online option. For her coaching position, she described students' engagement as less of an effort and more of a joy, because students wanted to be there. However, mental health quickly became a significant concern for her as she began to monitor her students via Zoom and motivate them to compete.

### **Trustworthiness**

I ensured the trustworthiness of the data using member checking, detailed transcription, and frequent debriefing sessions (Seale & Silverman, 1997; Shenton, 2004). First, member checking and detailed transcription worked in tandem and member checking was done throughout the data collection and data analysis processes of this study. Each interview was video recorded on Zoom and transcribed to capture the nuances more accurately (Seale & Silverman, 1997). Frequent summaries of participants' perceptions were stated throughout the interview to assure accurate interpretation of their statements.

During the second interview, participants had the opportunity to alter or add anything after reflecting on the topic (Torrance, 2012). In addition to confirmation from the participants, frequent debriefing sessions with a critical friend allowed for the refinement of any concepts mentioned as well as identifying any biases that appeared

(Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Shenton, 2016). Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) defined a critical friend as someone “who asks critical questions, provocative questions, provides data for examination through an alternative lens, and offers critique as a friend” (p. 207). Finally, I maintained a journal throughout the entire process of this study to aid in documenting experiences and reflecting on teachers' approaches to student engagement which assisted in determining the most appropriate communication of the data and data collection strategies (Lapan et al., 2012). After I analyzed the data, I sent the “data analysis” chapter to each participant to ensure the themes and categories aligned with their contributions. This step avoided any biases or generalizations in the data points and presented to the perceptions of the participants without outside influence.

All research data were kept in an encrypted folder on a personal Texas State Udrive account, and all identifiers were anonymized. This study had minimal risks. Participants who felt uncomfortable with any questions were able to decline to answer them. Participants were able to remove themselves from the study at any time. The benefits of the study were to contribute important perspectives to current research on how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced secondary education, and important descriptions of how educational practices were impacted. Participants themselves may have benefitted through reflection. I also shared the completed thesis with the participants.

### **Delimitations**

The present study was delimited by only collecting data through two interviews from four teachers, separated by one week as opposed to leaving more time to allow the concepts discussed to develop and be representative of a full post-pandemic school year. The present study was also delimited by the decision to collect data from only one source,

interviews with secondary teachers, as opposed to collecting multiple forms of data to triangulate the findings and add to the trustworthiness of the data. The decision to include only secondary teachers' perspectives came from an observed gap in the research, and a general focus on university level teachers and students. This data collection strategy was chosen out of an abundance of caution.

## **IV. FINDINGS**

Martin and Collie (2019) argued that positive teacher-student relationships yield higher levels of student engagement, creating an inclusive environment and fomenting student agency (Mikami et al., 2017), which in turn yields higher academic achievement (Martin & Collie, 2019; Olivier et al., 2020). During the discussions with the teachers in this study, it became clear that having the freedom to focus on forming teacher-student relationships was a significant factor that the teachers' considered when discussing their responses to the pandemic and how it affected their student engagement strategies.

Throughout the eight interviews that composed this study, participants were asked to define what student engagement was to them. Many of the answers were layered by a discussion of the purpose of student engagement as well as before and after explanations of what engagement looked like for them before the pandemic, how it looked during the school year, and how it looked during the 2021-2022 school year. The data for this chapter are organized in terms of themes that emerged in the interviews. Through the interview data, several patterns became immediately evident while others were inductively consolidated into four broader categories.

### **2020-2021 School Year**

In March of 2020, each participant of this study transitioned to an online learning modality as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic spreading across the United States. Ms. Jones initially treated the remote learning approach in March of 2020 as “a quick two weeks,” but also recognized the severity of the situation: “I think I knew deep down we weren't coming back, but I couldn't let the kids know because I wanted to maintain that hope.” This sentiment was common in all four participants, particularly concerning

maintaining student morale and identifying students' well-being and mental health. Ms. Jones added that she “wasn't able to build those relationships and get down to the nitty gritty of what was really going on in their life” at the beginning of the pandemic.

All participants discussed the low participation in their online classes in the form of students not turning on their cameras or submitting work. Because the teachers could not physically see their students, Ms. Madrigal also discussed how it was difficult to “read their body language and keep them on task” during the online learning modality. This is an essential component of how these teachers responded to the pandemic as being able to identify students' needs became more of a challenging task.

The teachers also discussed the challenges behind creating a student-centered learning environment where their needs were met, and their satisfaction with their education would ultimately yield higher student agency, which would also yield higher student engagement, which would in turn yield higher academic achievement (Mameli et al., 2020; Olivier et al., 2019; Taub et al., 2019). By being unable to establish this environment, all participants discussed the impact being online had on their student engagement. Their responses varied in tone and ranged from Ms. Madrigal saying, “I feel like I lost some student engagement” to Ms. Ramirez saying, “student engagement was obviously rough, but what I found useful was using the chat.”

Teachers' practices of engaging students were affected by needing to identify new ways of checking students' understanding and checking their overall well-being. Furthermore, all participants described their experiences in the 2020-2021 school year positively, often discussing the student-centered philosophies of their campus or district that allowed them to focus on building teacher-student relationships in their online

classrooms. This point is in contention with their discussions of the difficulties surrounding the online learning modality. To summarize, all of the teachers enjoyed the freedom to prioritize their teacher-student relationships but were also challenged that not having their students present in the same physical location, which affected their ability to create the type of environment that could be conducive to student agency for some students.

### **2021-2022 School Year**

All participants returned to full in-person teaching for the 2021-2022 school year. Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez described a drastic change in the approach behind policies between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Ms. Ramirez described the change as being from “centered mostly on the students and how you are with them” to having a checklist of “things we have to have that have nothing to do with the students.” This sentiment was echoed by Ms. Ramirez who said, “do I really have to write 'yes' on a whiteboard just to show you that I agree with you?” when referring to their evaluation process and its “check marks.” In other words, Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones described a more permanent shift in focus to the well-being of the students and the relationships teachers had with their students while Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez described a focus on student well-being for the 2020-2021 school year but an abrupt change to a more meticulous and itemized “pointless” checklist approach for teacher evaluation going into the 2021-2022 school year.

This change in approach on part of the districts created a clear divide between the participants in terms of how these policies impacted the atmosphere of their online classrooms. Once again, Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones came from two different single-

high-school districts in Central Texas while Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez came from the same multi-high-school district in Central Texas. Both Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones described their resources and campus support in a positive way. Ms. Jones stated, “we pretty much have endless resources,” while Ms. Madrigal agreed that “they did the best they could” when referring to the district's approach to teachers' and students' well-being throughout the course of the pandemic. This aspect of the pandemic is essential to understanding what informed teachers' strategies to the pandemic and how they would engage their students.

As is evident in the statements of the participants, the approach that these districts took in terms of priorities for teachers informed these teachers' lesson plans and their approach to their classroom management. While two teachers worked in districts that maintained a priority on teacher and student well-being and prioritized teacher-student relationships, those teachers felt they were able to engage with students more successfully during the 2021-2022 school year whereas the other two teachers felt they were fulfilling a meaningless quota designed by a district that did not have their students' or teachers' well-being in mind.

The transition to the 2021-2022 school year became a central focus of the end of the first round of interviews as each participant was asked to describe the decisions their districts made and the atmosphere those decisions created. The freedom the participants had to explore what approach best established a positive online atmosphere seemed to please all participants more, despite having its own challenges, while Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez were extremely displeased with the change in focus of their district. Furthermore, the new priorities these teachers had to consider when establishing the

environment of their in-person classes again decreased their sense of freedom to establish those positive relationships, which previous research has suggested could have affected their student engagement, students' academic achievement, as well as their agency (see Mamel et al, 2020; Mikami et al., 2017; Olivier et al., 2020; Taub et al., 2019).

### **Lowered Expectations**

Perhaps the most frequently occurring theme in all interviews was the discussion of lowered expectations of teachers and school districts when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in their student engagement practices and policies. All four participants specifically used the term "lowered expectations," and essentially described it as being an effort to not overwhelm students and incentivize participation in the online classroom by providing interactive activities and short assignments with flexible deadlines. All participants also discussed using some form of course management software to administer assignments and playing different games with their students to create an interactive environment. Mr. Montemayor discussed the lowered expectations of the early pandemic had many teachers "unable to teach because it was difficult to engage students." He went on to say:

I mean I would be lying if I said that the expectations are not low. You know before maybe we would have expected students to engage with material for longer, and now it is just the engagement is going to be shorter. It is going to be probably a little more fast paced. I mean overall, definitely expectations have been lowered.

Ms. Madrigal had a similar opinion about the change in expectations from pre-pandemic to the end of the spring 2020 semester and school year. She explained that

“pre-pandemic maybe there was a lot of fluff, maybe there was a lot of extra activities in order to engage the students, but now we’ve really just focused on what they really need to know.” Ms. Ramirez echoed the sentiments of Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Madrigal when she said “my standards were kind of low, my expectations were kind of low. I stated really slow as to not overwhelm them, I just wanted to see them talk. I wanted to see them answering questions and like actually working on anything.” Ms. Jones had a unique experience as a sports coach but stated that teachers had to “come up with some really creative ideas on just how to get the class talking and engaging and wanting to be there.” Although all of the teachers taught different courses, they all described having to adjust their student engagement approaches to best respond to the low participation rates of the online learning modality.

All of the teachers seemed to be in favor of this focus on what “really mattered” in terms of content delivery. However, according to Ms. Ramirez, it quickly became evident that “not a lot of learning is going on,” and the professional development opportunities offered were a “waste of time and made for an idealistic classroom. Not idealistic, unrealistic.” This teacher described feeling that the district was preparing teachers in such a way that did not align with the reality of their classroom atmosphere or student population, and therefore teachers' response to the pandemic had to include lowering the expectations of their student engagement practices. All teachers discussed making no more than one assignment due per week with many of the assignments being just a few questions. As previously mentioned, Ms. Ramirez discussed their concern with giving the students too much work and overwhelming them saying “talking, even if it wasn’t about chemistry, just like engaging with me as a person I think helps a lot

engaging with the content if they are able to engage with me.”

Ms. Jones described the early pandemic as having “a glimmer of hope” that it was going to be a quick two-week hiatus before she returned to “normal.” Similar to the sentiments of other participants, Ms. Jones described teaching online during the school year, stating:

We had maybe three kids in class and then 20 kids online, and so you do not really get to know the kids online because their cameras are not on, they are not really talking. Are they even there? Did they just log in and fall asleep and then the kids on campus who you try to work with think “if I stayed at home I wouldn't be pestered this much.”

Essentially, the participants discussed teachers' responses to the pandemic as having to address students' lack of participation in their online classes, and their engagement strategies had to acknowledge and address this decrease in student participation in their online classes.

In contrast to the other participants, Ms. Madrigal described her approach to student engagement as unchanging throughout the transition to the online learning modality and return to in-person learning. Like the other participants, their school district offered an online learning option for the school year, with a majority of their students being online in Zoom classes. “I lost some engagement during the pandemic, but it came back when we returned in-person,” she stated. Ms. Madrigal also described a lowering of the expectations across their content area and a removal of the “fluff” that didn't matter as much, but when it came to students not being engaged online she would try “emails with their parents, and if that did not work I would just pick up the phone and call the parent,”

and essentially maintaining what she considered to be an adequate level of engagement in their classes.

This response from Ms. Madrigal was unique to the other participants who basically all said their engagement online was low since she first transitioned to an online learning modality in March of 2020 and stayed that way until the 2021-2022 school year when she returned to an in-person learning modality. All participants discussed their academic expectations in the form of assignment submission, assignment quality, and amount of content per lesson as being lowered during school year. This is relevant to the research question because as teachers' responses to the pandemic sought to address the lack of participation in their online classes, their responses impacted their approaches to student engagement by lowering the academic expectations of the students in the form of shorter assignments and longer deadlines.

### **District Expectations**

Perhaps the most dominant theme that was observed during the interviews was the perceived and literal expectations as defined by the participants on part of their school districts. The term “district expectations” was not explicitly defined by participants but rather eluded to when describing the responsibilities their districts placed on them. These responsibilities included an increase in the frequency of administrator observations and a reinstatement of policies and procedures that were suspended at the beginning of the pandemic. Despite different approaches from different school districts, what teachers did in their classrooms (their student engagement strategies) was influenced by their district's expectations during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. For the participants of this study, the communication of the district's expectations came in the form of formal

and informal evaluations by campus administrators on the teachers. Three of the four participants had an evaluation system in place at the time of the pandemic that slightly changed for the 2020-2021 school year, while one participant's district began a formal evaluation process during the 2021-2022 school year.

Mr. Montemayor described his discontent with his district requiring student data in the form of spreadsheets designed to monitor their academic progress by writing “less spread sheets more humanity” on his dry erase board. He went on to say “I have noticed this a lot in the decade and a half that I have done this. There has been too much focus on the quantitative measurement of learning, and it is not a science.” Ms. Ramirez described how during the 2020-2021 school year, her district took an approach to teacher evaluation that was “significantly less pressure,” meaning teachers had more freedom to explore their student engagement strategies and adjust their responses to their classes' needs during the pandemic. She also mentioned that although the evaluation process allowed for more freedom in terms of teacher adaptation to the online learning modality, the challenge of student engagement in the online classroom itself was the inconsistency with the student participation, stating that they had “a lot more engagement in my advanced classes, but it was my grade level students that I was mostly concerned about... Maybe five [out of over 20] students turning on their cameras.”

Both Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez described a shift in the evaluation process from the 2020-2021 school year to the 2021-2022 school year. Ms. Ramirez described the approach of the 2020-2021 school year as being “student focused, centered on the students and how you were doing with them,” whereas the 2021-2022 school year the focus seemed to be more on making sure the teachers have “student success criteria”

for their lesson visible somewhere in the classroom. She stated that teachers “were just doing it (writing the student success criteria) so that when we got observed we could check that box.” This sentiment is consistent with what Mr. Montemayor stated about the districts approach as well. Although he described his district's response as flexible as they lessened the priority of such elements of evaluation for the 2021-2022 school year because “they realized it is not an effective way of measuring learning.” In other words, Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez discussed how their district's policies for the 2020-2021 school year were more student-centered and therefore their comfort level with their strategies increased, and the evaluation-oriented change in approach during the 2021-2022 school affected their approach to student engagement to adhere to the district's expectations.

In contrast to the statements of Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez, Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones described their school district's expectations as aligning with their own for the most part. Ms. Jones described their evaluation process during the 2020-2021 school year as helping them understand “they were on the right track, I was doing okay.” Ms. Madrigal worked in a school district that had no set requirements on how or when teachers were observed until the 2021-2022 school year, where they began requiring all teachers to schedule a formal evaluation once per semester to be done by an administrator. Neither Ms. Madrigal nor Ms. Jones described this process as a negative one, and the only difference between their district's evaluation policy and the policies of Mr. Montemayor’s and Ms. Ramirez’s districts was the frequency and focus of the observations. Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez both described a formal and informal observation process that focused on “check boxes” and “spread sheets,” while Ms.

Madrigal and Ms. Jones described them as helpful. It is worth noting that Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones came from two different, single high school districts in Central Texas while Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez came from the same large multi-high-school district in Central Texas.

### **Teacher Satisfaction**

When teacher satisfaction was discussed in these interviews, the topic of the district's response and requirements of teachers during the 2020-2021 school year became the crux of the discussion. Mr. Montemayor (who came from the same district as Ms. Ramirez) discussed the change in priorities as a missed opportunity to “really drastically change the system, and we did not.” In other words, there was a tremendous sense of disappointment among Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez over the control of teachers' decision making when it came to their responses to student needs during the pandemic. Both Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez felt that by prioritizing teacher-student relationships and students' mental health they were more satisfied with their situation in the classroom despite both participants discussing instances of lower student engagement.

Despite having different requirements imposed upon them, all participants expressed satisfaction with having more freedom to address the needs of their students through trial-and-error engaging activities during the 2020-2021 school year. Ms. Madrigal said “I remember having a whole mental health first-aid training. I do not know how they planned it, but it was about relevant stuff that they plan around stuff that is current.” She also discussed having a “specialized instructor” run a professional development on student engagement and “just trying to engage all learners like SPED and 504.” However, for the school district that changed approach for the 2021-2022

school year, the disappointment and frustration was palpable during the interviews. In Ms. Jones' athletic periods she described the 2020-2021 school year as being a positive influence on teachers' practices for the 2021-2022 school year. She said:

Some of them had not been on campus since their freshman year, first semester and now they are juniors. There was a lot of growing pains at the beginning of the semester, but I think everyone has kind of sorted those out, got a good rhythm.

The discussion of the participants' satisfaction with their overall experience as teachers was recognizable early in the interview processes. All the participants discussed having lost teachers to retirement, moving schools or career change since the beginning of the pandemic, but Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez both expressed a drastic loss in teachers at their schools during the 2021-2022 school year which they attributed to the change in their district's philosophy. Ms. Ramirez described the change in philosophy of their district was "humiliating" to teachers. She went on to say:

I am leaving teaching and I never ever thought that I would be feeling this way. But I think that, combined with everything else, I just realized how overwhelmingly under-appreciated we are, and I feel like I do not deserve that. Teachers do not deserve that.

This comment was in discussion of her district's transition from having a student-centered approach during the 2020-2021 school year to the more "check-box" oriented approach of evaluating teachers for components of their lesson that did not pertain to their relationship with their students.

In Mr. Montemayor's experience, many teachers were "scared" during the 2020-2021 school year. He stated that "I was too, of too many kids failing, not teaching, not

being able to actually instruct the kids because it was really difficult to engage them. It was like talking with ghosts.” Despite feeling scared to “fail” at instructing the students, Mr. Montemayor also observed several student excelling with the freedom that the 2020-2021 school year had given them. He stated that “teachers went above and beyond and created a lot of new spaces for these students, and we took it away from them very quickly.” Because of their school district changing the rules for teachers and requiring more observations and quantitative data in the form of spread sheets, Mr. Montemayor felt that teachers had “failed students,” in the sense that “we’re still not going to learn from our mistakes and learn from the good things that came out of the pandemic in teaching and learning and less of planning and actually helping out a child.”

In contrast to the experiences of Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez, Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones described the requirements that influenced their responses to their students' needs as positive and growth oriented. Ms. Madrigal discussed their collaboration with fellow teachers by using Microsoft Teams chat, saying “something I use is we have our teams with the teachers that teach that level and there we will just talk about different ways in which we instructed something. Through that I learn a lot through my co-workers as well.” She defined successful student engagement as “active thinking and participation and applying their knowledge to whatever it is they [students] might be learning.” Similarly, Ms. Jones also discussed having a positive experience engaging their students despite having similar issues as the other participants with student engagement. When discussing the annual evaluation by their alternative certification program advisor during the 2020-2021 school year she explained that she felt “really supported and I walked away feeling more confident.” She went on to say that during the 2021-2022 school year

“there will be observations throughout the year because I think during the pandemic the AP’s (assistant principals) were just trying to keep the boat afloat.” Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones both expressed feeling a supportive, cooperative atmosphere in their schools and as a result felt more confident and supported when they found ways to engage students in their online classrooms.

Essentially, all participants expressed their satisfaction with the way their district handled the transition to the online learning modality during the 2020-2021 school year, and as a result were able to have a certain level of comfort when it came to exploring their student engagement strategies. However, two of the participants felt strongly about the way their district changed its approach from a student-centered one to a more itemized and specific goal-oriented approach during the 2021-2022 school year. This change in approach resulted in a change of “mood” in Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez, where rather than feeling supported in their pursuit of successful student engagement they began to feel that they were fulfilling insignificant requirements that did not address their students' needs or aid them in engaging students during the 2021-2022 school year. This feeling of lack of support and focus on “menial” tasks was evident in both teachers’ disappointment with their district. Mr. Montemayor said:

I have my common hashtag on my board in my classroom that says, “fewer spreadsheets, more humanity.” I have said it to digital people, I said it to superintendent people, to people that are fresh into this district but have a lot of decisions to take power. They are wasting time. I need people, I need human beings that want to be with kids.

## V. DISCUSSION

In preparation for this study, there was an observed gap in the perspectives of secondary teachers in the United States, particularly surrounding student engagement during their transition to an online learning modality. For this reason, all of the participants in this study worked as teachers when the pandemic began and through the 2021-2022 school year. This research topic is essential to understanding secondary teachers' experiences during the pandemic and how their adaptations to the online learning environment could have informed their ideas of student engagement. This study consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with four high school teachers who taught in four different schools and three different school districts.

The original purpose of this study was to observe the impacts secondary teachers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had on their student engagement strategies. This study aimed to contribute to the research surrounding secondary teachers' experiences during the pandemic, specifically teachers who transitioned to an online learning modality. However, as the interviews took place the focus of the study began to shift towards how teachers adapted to the challenges they were facing. Particularly with two participants, Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez, whose school districts imposed rules that greatly impacted their ability to respond to their students' needs and their overall satisfaction with their jobs.

During the interviews, all participants were quick to identify the prominent issues they faced, most predominantly being the lowered expectations of the teachers on the students and their concern for their mental health and well-being. Participants also discussed how support from their school and school district positively impacted their

ability to adapt to the online classroom and find ways to engage with students despite participants reporting a need to lower expectations based on student participation in the online classroom. All participants discussed having ample support and room to exercise their creativity when it came to engaging students in the online classroom during the classroom. According to the participants, this support led to high teacher satisfaction as teachers had more freedom to respond to the pandemic in a way that allowed them to be creative with their student engagement activities.

Despite participants' overall satisfaction with their student engagement during the school year, two of the participants worked in a school district that made many changes to its approach during the summer of 2021. According to these two participants, many of the changes did not address the needs of the students or the teachers and introduced new and arbitrary evaluations that diminished teachers' morale and ability to respond to the needs of the students and control their engagement strategies. Furthermore, the participants in the district that changed its approach went on to discuss the impact these policies had on their schools, both stating that their schools had many vacancies and many teachers not returning to their school or leaving teaching altogether. One of the participants, Ms. Ramirez, was one of the teachers who had decided to leave teaching for the private sector, citing the "egregious" and "humiliating" policies of their school district as their primary reason for leaving.

Essentially, the interviews started off with a discussion of the transition from an in-person to an online learning modality in March of 2020. The participants discussed the challenges of this last portion of that semester and how their districts informed their choices for the school year based on this small window of the semester. Based on the low

participation levels of the end of the Spring 2020 semester, the three school districts mentioned in this study took a student-centered approach that focused on the well-being and mental health of the students and teachers as they navigated their new online classrooms. Despite participants' satisfaction with this approach, one of the school districts introduced what were described as punitive and arbitrary rules that stifled their ability to respond to the needs of their students and control their engagement strategies when they had to fulfill the requirements of their district through meticulous and frequent observation by administrators.

### **Teacher Agency**

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) discussed agency as being a social engagement that is rooted in a consideration of the past, present, and future. These authors defined agency as being a temporally constructed active engagement which culminates as an interactive response to a posed problem. Throughout the teachers' interviews, the issue of teacher agency became more and more prominent. As teachers perceived more freedom to act as they saw fit during the 2020-2021 school year, they discussed feeling growth and positive outcomes despite the many challenges of their shift to the online learning modality. However, as Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez re-integrated into the in-person classroom, their freedom to choose their best practices was inhibited by their school district's meticulous and evaluative approach to their classroom standards. Their district changed its approach to responding to the pandemic, requiring teachers to have more observations and creating a list of requirements for teachers.

Charteris and Smardon (2015) argued that teacher agency was essential to their ability to reflect and approach issues in education. The authors argued the importance of

recognizing teachers as professionals who aim to improve the issues surrounding education, implying a layer of trust to be placed on teachers. Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez described feeling coerced into a situation where their actions drew more from the requirements that formed part of their pedagogical evaluation than their own professional opinions. In other words, their decision making was largely influenced by their districts' expectations, which could imply a lack of trust, and which could have impaired these teachers' ability to respond to the many issues they faced as students were welcomed back into classrooms after a year of virtual learning. Ms. Madrigal and Ms. Jones, whose actions became more inspired by their own perceived abilities, both felt empowered by the collaboration and trust that were afforded to them as educators.

Teacher agency is decision-making that is inspired by what teachers have learned previously as professionals, is oriented towards progress or the future, and is composed of the decisions teachers make when they must act (Biesta et al., 2014; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). A teacher's ability to act is influenced by their past experiences and varies according to situations. These decisions that teachers feel empowered to make are based on their values, their beliefs and what they consider to be most important when dealing with a particular situation (Priestley et al., 2012). Considering these conceptualizations and theories on agency and teacher agency, the frustrations felt by Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez may be viewed as part of a distinct research literature that strays from the original intentions of this study. Many researchers have discussed the under-theorization of agency and teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2014; Charteris & Smardon, 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2012), and based on the responses of this study's participants, future research is recommended to better understand the impacts of

promoting teacher agency on teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, and student outcomes.

### **Agency and District Expectations**

Student agency, as discussed by Bandura (2000), is a product of a creating an environment where students feel the urge to make things happen. Inspired by this description, I previously defined student agency in relation to student “action” because agency is essentially about the perceived act of “making things happen.” The discussion with the participants surrounded a larger theme of freedom of action, not only fostering action within students but also teachers’ freedom to act as they saw appropriate in order to address the needs of their students. While the present study initially focused on teachers’ responses to the pandemic and how these responses impacted their student engagement strategies, the connection between teacher-student relationships and agency became clear in relation to both teachers and students.

According to Ms. Jones, her school’s approach to evaluation and collaboration among teachers during the transition back to the in-person classroom for the 2021-2022 school year made her feel like she was improving as an educator. Similarly, Ms. Madrigal said that her school was “doing the best they could,” and that whenever teachers needed help with things like student engagement, she could rely on colleagues within her department for resources. Both teachers worked in school districts that encouraged teacher growth in a way that allowed them to feel a level of freedom that left the teachers satisfied with their responses to the pandemic and ultimately having more positive relationships with their students. As before discussed, these positive relationships have implications for fostering student agency.

For teachers, fostering agency became a critical component to engaging students during the 2020-2021 school year. As Ms. Ramirez put it, the transition back to the in-person classroom saw a change in focus to “things we must have that have nothing to do with the students.” Similarly, Mr. Montemayor discussed the expectation of having objectives written on the board and having “checkbox” items take priority over their actual relationships with the students and the classroom environment. At this point, a kind of chain reaction of teacher-student relationships becomes relevant. These teachers’ districts implemented policies that, according to Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez, did not allow teachers to easily prioritize their relationships with their students, which previous research has found can lead to lower student engagement, which can diminish the inclusivity of the classroom environment, which in turn decreases student agency and academic achievement (Martin & Collie, 2019; Mikami et al., 2017; Olivier et al, 2020).

### **Student Motivation and Lowered Expectations**

According to all four of the participants, lowered student motivation in the spring semester of 2020 is what inspired the school districts to adopt their “lowered expectations” during the school year. As previously discussed, student motivation is the inspiration students use to guide themselves through their coursework (Jenkins & Demaray, 2015). Similarly, Ms. Jones described the participation in their class as dwindling in the remainder of the spring 2020 semester. She discussed having very few students join the Zoom classes, not being able to see their faces and lack of student participation over Zoom. For this reason, Ms. Ramirez discussed how “not a lot of learning was going on” in the online classroom. Although at the university level, Daniels et al. (2021) described a similar phenomenon in their study, arguing that student

motivation was severely decreased during the spring semester of 2020.

In contrast to the findings of the Alawamleh et al. (2020) study, which found that most students preferred an in-person learning modality, Ms. Jones discussed how many students were displeased with their experience returning in-person during the school year. She described it as a nuisance, saying students' mentality was "if I stay home, I would not be pestered so much." The difference, however, is that in the Alawamleh et al. (2020) study the authors were referring to a theoretical in-person modality. In other words, the students in that study were advocating for going back to the pre-pandemic in-person modality rather than the one that was adapted in the current study's participants' classes where all students participated through Zoom regardless of whether they were in-person or not.

The connection between student motivation, engagement, and satisfaction with learning was discussed in Obiosa (2020), where it was affirmed that maintaining high student motivation and meaningful engagement increased students' satisfaction with learning outcomes. This is relevant to the present study because, as Mr. Montemayor discussed, many teachers found themselves "unable to teach" because of their struggles with engaging students in the online learning modality of the school year. In an effort to increase student motivation, Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez both discussed transitioning to more "meat and potatoes" teaching of what "really mattered" according to them. However, this is where the study reached a divergent point in the responses of the participants. Ms. Jones and Ms. Madrigal found themselves in positive situations in terms of student engagement. While both participants described participation as being lowered, neither described student participation in such a negative way as Mr.

Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez. At any rate, the participants of the present study discussed difficulties engaging students in an online learning modality, which is a domino effect that impacts students' motivation and satisfaction with learning outcomes (Obiosa, 2020; Tasgin & Coskun, 2018).

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

As previously discussed, Lau (2019) argued that teachers' professional development often addresses their needs in terms of designing engaging activities and understanding the needs of their students. At the beginning of the pandemic in the spring semester of 2020, no teachers had any preparation for what was to come. The participants in this study had to transition from an in-person to an exclusively online learning modality from March of 2020 until the end of that semester. Over the summer, their districts prepared for the school year by providing teachers with professional development opportunities that would help them address their transition to an online learning modality, despite all participants' schools offering a hybrid model where an exceedingly small number of students were present on campus while teachers taught their courses over Zoom. While studies have shown that elevated levels of student engagement render positive teacher-student relationships and high academic outcomes (Roorda et al., 2021), the focus of the school year for these participants quickly became to find ways to build those meaningful teacher-student relationships in an online learning modality.

The participants of this study had diverging opinions on their experiences with professional development leading up to the school year. All participants discussed their approval of the way their schools prepared them for the 2020-2021 school year, Ms. Ramirez stated that the administration's priority had shifted to have a stronger emphasis

on student and teacher well-being and establishing relationships with their students. According to current research, prioritizing student-teacher relationships can directly impact the levels of student engagement in a class, which explains why the participants all expressed their approval of the approach and their comfort level when it came to their online classes (Edwards et al., 2021; Lau, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019; Roorda et al., 2021). Despite the participants expressing their challenges when it came to the online classroom, their district's orientation towards teacher and student well-being allowed for them to create the kind of atmosphere in their classrooms that was mindful of students' struggles while giving the participants power to control what and how they taught.

Contrary to the concept of prioritizing student and teacher relationships and facilitating student engagement, the participants discussed divergent opinions as the 2020-2021 school year ended and the 2021-2022 school year began. Ms. Jones and Ms. Madrigal were the two participants that worked in school districts that had one high school and lower levels of students' classified as "economically disadvantaged," and coincidentally both districts kept the same approach to the 2021-2022 school year as they had for the 2020-2021 school year. This meant their preparation and implementation of administrative responsibilities were the same for both school years, no new responsibilities were given to teachers during this time. Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Montemayor both taught in the school, multi-high-school district in schools with 25% and 62% of students being classified as economically disadvantaged, respectively. Their school districts drastically changed their policies in regard to teachers and their responsibilities and priorities in the classroom for the 2021-2022 school year, both expressing their strong disapproval for the way their district not only stifled teachers'

progress made during the 2020-2021 school year but loaded them with more “meticulous” and “meaningless” responsibilities.

A clear relationship in the research exists between student engagement and positive teacher-student relationships (Roorda et al., 2021; Lau, 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019; Edwards et al., 2021). When discussing the 2020-2021 school year, all participants acknowledged the challenges of engaging their students in an online learning modality but nevertheless expressed their overall satisfaction with their ability and freedom to prioritize their effort in engaging their students without having to worry about additional responsibilities or formal observations from administrators. When transitioning to the 2021-2022 school year, this freedom was taken away from Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Madrigal as their district prioritized meticulous and frequent administrator observations. Mr. Montemayor expressed this change as a “lost opportunity” to change the system and steer away from a “check box” approach to education, while Ms. Madrigal felt she was able collaborate better with their co-workers. Similarly, Ms. Jones expressed that their schools’ approach left them “feeling supported and more confident.” The impact of this difference in approach was never clearer than it was when Ms. Ramirez stated:

I am leaving teaching and I never ever thought that I would be feeling this way. But I think that, compiled with everything else, I just realized how overwhelmingly under-appreciated we are, and I feel like I do not deserve that. Teachers do not deserve that.

### **Strategies**

As discussed previously, the original intentions of this study were to better understand the specific strategies that teachers used to engage students during the

pandemic. While participants briefly discussed their engagement strategies, the focus of the interviews quickly changed to be on the execution of the transition to the online learning modality on the campus and district level. Part of that discussion involved the “lowered expectations” as described by the teachers as being a lighter load of work with less strict deadlines. Ms. Madrigal described the change in focus on content delivery as a positive thing, removing the “fluff” from the material and focusing on “what really mattered.” All of the participants said something along those lines of focusing on what really mattered in the content. All of the participants also discussed playing collaborative games online with their students and using online platforms such as canvas to organize their course material.

A common theme in the discussion of the philosophy behind these strategies was that of the “student-centered” classroom, where the participants’ approach to engagement focused on student needs and collaboration facilitated by the instructor (Dolezal et al., 2018). During the school year, participants had the freedom to establish their classrooms as they saw fit. The participants all discussed their districts’ main focus being to establish positive teacher-student relationships to establish an expectation of student agency, which would ultimately render high academic achievement (Dolezal et al., 2018; Mikami et al., 2017; Olivier et al., 2019). Similar to the findings of Miller et al. (2019), the participants were working with flexible deadlines to try and invoke student agency in a way that was student-centered. By giving one assignment per week and lowering the amount of “fluff” the participants could streamline what she considered to be the most pertinent information to her students.

Throughout the interviews it became evident that the participants used primarily a

Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) approach, where students oversaw their own behavior and motivation (Li & Lajoie, 2021). However, because of the abrupt nature of the transition to the online learning modality, the participants of the current study were unable to develop self-regulating skills in their students. Typically, SRL is most successful when students are given tasks that target their self-regulating skills to develop their “self-efficacy,” or agency, which enables them to express their needs as students and accomplish their goals in ways that work best for them (Cerón et al., 2020; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Consistent with the findings of Estévez et al. (2021) and Broadbent et al. (2021), the participants discussed having lower student engagement when implementing these SRL strategies in their online classrooms, which could be the result of their lack of time to prepare students and nurture their strengths to build their self-regulation.

The teachers in this study felt forced to implement SRL strategies without getting the opportunity to get to know their students and nurture their strengths or build their self-regulating skills. Because of this, the participants saw a decrease in their engagement, as the students’ self-regulating skills were put to the test. In response to this, teachers lowered the amount of work students had to do, streamlined the content to be what they considered to be most important, and expanded deadlines to compensate for not being able to build students’ self-regulation skills. Although the participants of the present study discussed challenges with students respecting the flexible deadlines, they reported feeling more respected by having the power to determine what was best for their students. It may be of some relevance to note that Ms. Jones and Ms. Madrigal ultimately saw higher student agency and achievement through relaxed deadlines and happened to

work in schools where the percentage of economically disadvantaged students was below 8%, whereas Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez worked in schools that had 62% and 25% of students being considered economically disadvantaged by their district. This could offer an explanation as to the difference in outcomes between the teachers, as students facing economic adversity during the school year may have had other responsibilities to consider other than just school.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The original intention of this study was to observe how teachers' responses affected student engagement; however, it became difficult to focus on student engagement and agency as the teachers had such strong opinions on the policies that dictated some of their responses to their students' needs. The teachers discussed not only how their responses affected their ability to engage students but also their job satisfaction and professional growth. The new knowledge contributed by this study lies in the responses of the participants when describing their school districts' approaches to teachers' responsibilities. The participants in this study contributed valuable perspectives regarding how the requirements of teachers could have shaped not only their satisfaction with their job but their ability to prioritize teacher-student relationships and make the decisions that best met their students' needs.

Teachers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their student engagement practices in many ways. For the participants in this study, the impact varied depending on the setting the teachers were working in. All participants expressed their approval of a student-centered approach during the first school year, when the teachers had more freedom to explore the best strategies to form connections with their students. During this school year, the participants all used self-regulated learning strategies to engage their students, which placed much of the responsibility for completing assignments on the students as teachers were unable to redirect student distractions online. Despite the challenge of engaging students in the online learning modality, the participants all expressed their satisfaction with being given the opportunity to establish positive teacher-student relationships which has been shown to increase student

engagement and academic outcomes. Because of these difficulties with engaging students in the online learning modality, the participants began to lower their expectations and make their assignments shorter with longer deadlines.

During the 2021-2022 school year, two of the participants expressed their disappointment when their school districts changed their approach from being one that focused on teacher-student relationships to an approach in which these two participants felt required to focus on an arbitrary list of requirements that often had nothing to do with their relationships with the students or what they were doing to ensure their students' needs were being met. These participants were required to complete checklists that, in their opinion, did not address the needs of the students. Their district increased the number of evaluations they were required to have for the school year and created new guidelines for them to follow. This change in approach was so intense that one participant expressed a decision to quit teaching and pursue a career in another field. In contrast, the two participants working in districts that maintained their student-centered approach and did not adopt the same changes expressed feeling supported and valued by their districts.

In preparation for this study a significant gap was observed in high school teachers' perceptions of their transition to an online learning modality and how their responsibilities impacted their abilities to engage students. There is still a need for research on the perspectives of high school age students that transitioned to an online learning modality and how they were impacted emotionally and academically from the strategies teachers implemented during this time. Further research is also recommended on how the size of a school district impacts teacher satisfaction, as in the present research there was a stark division between teachers at the smaller school districts and those of the

larger, multi-high school district.

The issues that this study identified varied depending on the participant and their work environment during their transition to an online learning modality in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and their transition back to an in-person learning modality for the 2021-2022 school year. The principle issue I observed was the focus of the school district changing during this “re-integration” from being student-centered and prioritizing teacher-student relationships to focusing on quantitative measurements of learning that put teachers in uncomfortable situations. The significance of this suggestion is paramount to the advancement of education. If a sample of four teachers whose involvement in this change in philosophy expressed such strong opinions about their experiences, education could benefit from research regarding this dichotomy between student-centered approaches versus the quantitative and evaluation-oriented approach discussed by Mr. Montemayor and Ms. Ramirez. Perhaps other teachers could have had similar experiences, and perhaps even quit teaching as a result of misguided policies that address the needs of neither teachers nor students.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview 1 Guide

**Topic of study:** Secondary Teachers' Student Engagement Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**State name**

**Subject taught**

**Years of experience**

#### Introductory Questions

1. What grade(s) do you teach?
2. How would you define student engagement?
3. How did you gauge successful engagement of students in your classroom pre-pandemic?
  - a. How did you address unsuccessful student engagement in your classroom, pre-pandemic?
3. What professional development opportunities does your district offer you to improve student engagement in your classroom?
4. What kind of resources are available for teachers in your school who struggle with student engagement?
5. What are your average class sizes?
  - a. Does this affect the use of technology in your classes?
  - b. If so, how?

#### Detailed questions (Before the pandemic)

1. Before the pandemic, what was your use of technology in the form of online apps and tools for the classroom like?
2. In your in-person teaching, how did you handle students that did not want to engage with your activities? How much differentiation would you incorporate?
3. What was a typical lesson structure (warm up, activity, group focus, etc.) for your class? Has it evolved since the pandemic began?
4. What is your districts' teacher evaluation policy? What are their metrics for gauging for student engagement?
5. Before the pandemic, how often would your lessons rely on student access to a computer and internet? How would students without access to these access class materials?
6. What was your top priority when planning a lesson before the pandemic? Did it change at all?
7. Before the pandemic, how much of a priority was observing students' mental health in person? Did that change as a result of the transition to an online learning

modality? If so, how?

8. Before the pandemic, what was your average class size? Has it changed since returning to an in-person learning modality?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview 2 Guide**

**Topic of study:** Secondary Teachers' Student Engagement Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**State name**

**Subject taught**

**Years of experience**

**Is there anything from the first interview you wish to change?**

#### **Clarification section**

1. How often, if at all, were you evaluated for your pedagogical practices during the two school years since the pandemic began?
  - a. If you were not observed, what was your school's administrator's policy for evaluations?
2. Did your own experiences with technology impact the success of your transition to the online classroom?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If so, how were these experiences impacted by the transition?
3. Is an in-person (as opposed to fully virtual) delivery of a lesson more or less conducive to student engagement?
  - a. If so, why?
4. Did you find it more or less difficult to engage students in a fully online classroom setting?
  - a. Please justify your response.
5. How often did you contact parents of failing students before vs after the transition?
  - a. What was your primary form of contact?
6. What opportunities did failing students get to raise their grades in the online classroom?
  - a. How did these opportunities differ from before the transition?
  - b. How will these opportunities change moving forward into a return to the in-person classroom?
7. Did your school district change policies (e.g., late work, attendance, tardy, teacher requirements, standardized testing) as a result of the pandemic?
  - a. If so, how did this impact your ability to engage students?
  - b. If not, how would leniency with these policies impact your ability to engage students?

## APPENDIX C



### INFORMED CONSENT

**Study Title:** Secondary Teachers' Experiences Engaging Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

**Researcher:** Nicolás Mingote

**Email:** nem1@txstate.edu

This consent form will provide information about why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It also will describe what you will need to do to participate and describe any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to give verbal acknowledgement or your participation in a recorded Zoom interview. You will be given a digital copy of this form to keep.

#### **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this study is to understand teacher perceptions regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student-engagement strategies. You are being asked to participate because you are a secondary level teacher who taught at a school that offered an online learning modality to their students during the 2019-2020 and school years.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in two approximately forty-five-minute Zoom interviews about your perceptions of engaging students online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon response to invitation, each potential participant will be sent a copy of this consent form to their email in PDF form, and an interview will be scheduled. Consent will be gained verbally through a reading of the consent form at the beginning of each interview. The interviews will be video recorded, transcribed, and the researcher will take notes. During the interviews, you will be asked to describe how the transition to the online classroom because of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your perceptions of student engagement and how the experience will inform your future engagement strategies. Before the second interview, you will be sent a copy of the transcript of the first interview. If you choose to alter or add anything at that point, you may do so. After the second interview, you will also be sent a transcript and video recording of that interview. My data analysis will begin when you approve of the data you provided. Finally, after the data analysis is complete, you will be sent a copy of the findings to confirm your perceptions were accurately portrayed.

#### **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are very minimal risks or discomforts to participating in this study. There is a potential risk for breach of confidentiality. If you become uncomfortable or upset by any

of the interview questions, you may decline to answer. You also may stop your participation in the study at any time.

### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

Participation in this study may benefit you indirectly through reflection. In addition, the information that you provide will contribute important perspectives to current research on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on secondary education.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC), the researcher, and a faculty research advisor (Dr. Jeffry King, 512-245-6477, [jtk32@txstate.edu](mailto:jtk32@txstate.edu)) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. A faculty advisor supervises graduate student research.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications that result from this research. Data will be kept for three years after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

There will be no financial compensation for the participants nor myself.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to participate. You may also decline to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the researcher, Nicolás Mingote, at [nem1@txstate.edu](mailto:nem1@txstate.edu).

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to the IRB Regulatory Manager, Monica Gonzales, 512-245-2334 ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)). The faculty research advisor for the study is Dr. Jeffry King, 512-245-6477 ([jtk32@txstate.edu](mailto:jtk32@txstate.edu)).

### **DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

You have read this form and decided that you will participate in the study described above. By providing consent, you agree that the project's general purposes, the particulars of involvement, possible risks have been explained to your satisfaction, and you may withdrawal at any time. Please verbally confirm with a "yes" or deny with a "no" the following questions.

- Do you consent to having all interviews video and audio recorded?

- Do you consent to having documentation linking you this study? (All identifiers will be anonymized).
- Do you understand the nature of this study as listed above including all of the risks, benefits and procedures involved in participation?
- **Knowing all of the above information including potential risks, benefits, and confidentiality do you wish to participate in this study?**

## APPENDIX D

### Recruitment Post

A vertical recruitment post with a red-to-orange gradient background. At the top, the text 'ATTENTION HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS!!' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below this is a green, hand-drawn style starburst shape containing the text 'I am seeking participants for my master's thesis study' in white. Underneath the starburst are three items, each with a small icon: a blue circular arrow icon followed by 'two 45-minute interviews', a red location pin icon followed by 'All interviews on Zoom', and a calendar icon followed by 'Schedule at your convenience'. Below these items, the word 'Topic:' is in bold, followed by 'Student engagement during the pandemic'. Then 'Requirements:' is in bold, followed by two lines of text: 'At least one year experience at the beginning of the 19-20 school year.' and 'Taught during the 20-21 school year.'. In the bottom right corner, there is a green starburst shape containing the text 'Feel free to repost or forward to potential participants!' in white.

## APPENDIX E

### Recruitment Email

Email invitation to participate in study

To: nem1@txstate.edu

From: Nicolás Mingote

BCC: [Potential participant email here]

Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Teachers' Strategies Engaging Students During COVID

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Dear XXX,

The purpose of this study is to better understand teachers' student engagement strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason you are being invited to participate is because you indicated your interest in participating via the Instagram post, had at least one year of teaching during the 2019-2020 school year, and are still presently teaching. Any information tying your identity to the research will be anonymized.

Participation will include two approximately 45-minute interviews which will take place on Zoom and will be transcribed as well. Any participation is entirely voluntary, and participants can back out at any time.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact me (Nicolás Mingote) at cell: 737-297-4747 or email: nem1@txstate.edu This project [IRB reference number: 7978] was approved by the Texas State IRB on Wednesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

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