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Exploring the Concerns of Online K-12 Teachers

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In this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study, we found that the experiences of online teachers are highly complex and individualized, and that the development of their concerns as teachers is largely unaffected by years of teaching experience. Because of the dramatic increase in online K-12 education, there is a need for additional research to understand evidence-based practices in online teaching. Few studies have attempted to capture the rich experience of online teachers through a careful analysis of their teaching concerns. In this study, educators from a large online K-12 institution were contacted via email and invited to participate. Final study participants were purposely selected to represent both new and experienced educators in order to understand the possible impact of teaching experience on the development of concerns. In total, seven educators were chosen to participate in two online video interviews and bimonthly journaling entries over a four-month period of time. These educators revealed numerous teaching-related concerns hereafter categorized by personal, instructional, and relational themes, along with categories found at the intersection of these three themes. The findings presented here encourage greater dialogue between teachers and organizational leaders to understand and mitigate the negative impact of these concerns.

Keywords: distance education, secondary teachers, teacher attitudes, online courses, qualitative research

Online K-12 education continues to grow rapidly in the United States. During 2013-2014, 2.2 million part-time and full-time K-12 students were enrolled in nearly 4.5 million online courses (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, & Watson, 2015). All states and the District of Columbia have online learning opportunities (Barbour, Archambault, & DiPietro, 2013; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011), and five states (Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia) require K-12 students to complete an online course prior to graduation (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). As online education grows, research to support online teaching and learning is struggling to keep pace (Archambault & Kennedy, 2014). In particular, the growth and development of teachers within their online experience, is still a new, largely unexplored territory. While the presence of an effective teacher is considered a major factor in a successful learning experience in any setting (Wicks, 2010), relatively little is known about the experience of online teachers (Rakes & Dunn, 2015).

In order to produce online teachers capable of creating and delivering meaningful learning experiences for students, teacher education and professional development programs must better understand the experiences of online K-12 educators. In particular, understanding and responding to the concerns of online teachers can help teachers increase their sense of self-efficacy (Boz & Boz, 2010), advance their sense of independence (Guillaume & Rudney, 1993), develop a realistic view of teaching within the learning context (Kagan, 1992), reduce levels of job-related stress (Çakmak, 2008), and encourage job retention (Cooper & He, 2012). Despite these benefits, however, very little research has been conducted on the concerns of online teachers. The current study aims to reveal these concerns in order to inform the design of teacher education programs and online teaching organizations that can help prospective and current online educators meet the demands and challenges inherent in online teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, examining the concerns of teachers has been considered critical to understanding their experience and development (Fuller, Parsons, & Watkins, 1974). Mok (2005) defined concerns as "feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and reactions" (p. 55) towards situations, and suggested that concerns illuminate instances where teachers feel insecure or incompetent to act. Fuller (1970) added that these concerns can develop after failed attempts to accomplish a goal, or through anticipated failed experiences.

If concerns reveal the teacher's perceived areas of incompetence (Mok, 2005), then unveiling these concerns provides profitable information that could be used to design and prepare training and support interventions.

For Fuller (1970), discerning the concerns of teachers is vital in designing relevant curriculum for preservice educators. Relevance is obtained by matching the teacher's concerns about teaching with supportive structures designed to overcome specific concerns. An education program that achieves relevance in this way avoids the tendency some programs have to answer "questions students are not asking" (Fuller, 1969, p. 208).

How teachers experience concerns in traditional learning environments is not a new area of research. Many studies have identified teachers' concerns in hopes of developing more effective educational programs and professional development opportunities. Fuller provided a useful categorization of concerns consisting of three categories: self or survival concerns, teaching situation concerns, and pupil concerns (Fuller & Bown, 1975). Traditional teachers' concerns with self are primarily evoked by the early process of transitioning from a student to a teacher (Fuller & Bown, 1975) and include reconciling their ideal views of teaching with reality (Cooper & He, 2012; Swennen, Jorg, & Korthagen, 2004), maintaining class control (Gilles et al., 2001; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Veenman, 1984), being evaluated by students, peers, parents, and administrators (Fuller, 1970; Fuller & Bown, 1975; Marso & Pigge, 1989; Veenman, 1984), balancing authority and facilitator roles in the classroom (Cooper & He, 2012), establishing relationships with students (Cooper & He, 2012; Guillaume & Rudney, 1993), defining an appropriate work/life balance (Gilles et al., 2001), and general feelings of teachers' self-efficacy (Gilles, Cramer, & Hwang, 2001). Teaching situation concerns are manifest when a teacher exhibits concerns about their instructional context and its associated activities. These concerns include a lack of quality instructional materials (Parsons & Fuller, 1974), large class sizes (Veenman, 1984), additional non-instructional duties (Swennen et al., 2004), and various environmental factors (Fuller & Bown, 1975). Finally, pupil concerns consider the needs and experiences of students and include motivating students to learn (Swennen et al., 2004; Veenman, 1984), using teaching materials that are relevant to the lives of the students (Fuller, 1970), and adapting instruction to specific student needs (Swennen et al., 2004; Veenman, 1984). Teachers who experience pupil concerns recognize the individual needs of their students, value fairness and impartiality, and desire to make curriculum accessible for students (Fuller & Bown, 1975).

Fuller suggested that teachers exhibit "regularities in their concern" (Fuller, 1970, p. 16) based on teaching experience. Teachers follow a sequential pattern of development along a self-other continuum, with self-concerns (e.g., self-survival, evaluation) at one end of the continuum and concerns about students (e.g., impact, needs) at the other end (Fuller, 1970; Fuller & Bown, 1975). It is considered optimal for a teacher to move

beyond self and teaching concerns to a position where they become more concerned about the needs, learning, and experiences of their students (Conway & Clark, 2003; Fuller & Bown, 1975).

While popular opinion seems to suggest that successful traditional teaching can easily transition into successful online teaching (Dessoff, 2009; Watson et al., 2011), the differences between these two settings may render practices in one setting incompatible with practices in the other. Researchers from Johns Hopkins University (n.d.) suggested that pedagogy, operational factors, and student characteristics represent three main categories of differences between traditional and online teaching environments, which may introduce unique concerns for online teachers. Studies have concurred that some pedagogical challenges are faced uniquely by online teachers. In the absence of synchronous demonstrations typical in some traditional courses, teachers and students find it difficult to adequately demonstrate principles in online settings (Chien & Brandenburg, 2006). Teachers in traditional learning environments rely on informal evaluations of students (e.g., facial expressions, body language, questions, etc.) to reveal their level of understanding and engagement, but these cues are less apparent or even non-existent in many online learning environments (Kenyon, 2007). Additionally, research suggests that teaching in an online setting requires the teachers to transition from the sage who directs all learning, to a guide who acts more as a facilitator (Hemschik, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). This change in teacher roles and the accompanying paradigm shift towards constructivist learning, may present significant challenges to online teachers.

Operational differences between traditional and online settings pose serious concerns for teachers. Online teachers largely suffer from a lack of training prior to beginning their teaching positions (Dawley, Rice, & Hinck, 2010; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Palloff & Pratt, 2001); rather, their training typically occurs on-the-job through the hiring institutions (Hemschik, 2008; Stewart, 2011; Zweig, 2015). Online teachers also ranked poor compensation (McAlister, Rivera, & Hallam, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2001) and a lack of time for course development (Palloff & Pratt, 2001) among some of their most frequent concerns. Research suggests that teaching online may require as much as two or three times the amount of time to teach similar courses in face-to-face settings (Chien & Brandenburg, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Therefore, a major concern for some online teachers is balancing time between interacting with students and fulfilling responsibilities beyond the actual teaching situation (Chien & Brandenburg, 2006).

Student differences between traditional and online settings represent additional concerns for some teachers. The growth of online education can be explained, in part, by increased access for at-risk students, migrant youth, incarcerated students, sick or homebound students, and elite athletes and

performers, among many others (Wicks, 2010). Kenyon (2007) categorized online students into two groups: "first resort" (p. 23) students who deliberately seek out online learning as a first choice because of their clear academic goals or extracurricular pursuits, and "last resort" (p. 23) students who have been underserved or who underachieved in traditional schools and look to online schools for reparation. While this dichotomous categorization likely oversimplifies the characteristics and motives of online students, the possible diversity of students attending a particular online course could present significant concerns for teachers. Thus, the online teacher must be prepared to effectively manage a culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse student population in an online space (Gemin et al., 2015; Hemschik, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Research in online education has revealed some significant pedagogical, operational, and student-related concerns faced by online teachers, but it is unclear if these concerns follow typical patterns that can be anticipated and subsequently addressed. Therefore, the present study considers how online teachers experience concerns (feelings, thoughts, and attitudes) towards actual or anticipated events or situations associated with their teaching. A greater understanding of the concerns of online teachers can inform the design of teacher education programs and professional development opportunities.

METHODS

This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA—Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). At the heart of IPA are the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology is concerned with developing an in-depth understanding of a small group of individuals with the goal to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76) by removing unessential characteristics. Hermeneutics involves the interpretation of texts through iterative part-to-whole and whole-to-part analyses. Idiography is the focus on the particular and is an additional foundation principle in interpretative phenomenological analysis. Idiography provides the scope of the study by committing to systematically explore the rich detail of a phenomenon within a specific context (Smith, et al., 2009). Thus, interpretative phenomenological analysis research seeks few purposively selected samples within a contextually rich environment.

Context

All research participants taught at the same online school in the Midwestern United States, a state funded non-profit virtual school providing supplemental online courses to middle and high school students using an independent study model. This institution employs hundreds of teachers, each one licensed with state-designated "highly qualified" (U.S. Department of

Education, 2004) status in their respective subject areas. Upon being hired, each teacher is required to complete an orientation course, with numerous ongoing professional development opportunities on various technological, pedagogical, and assessment topics available to them thereafter. Online teachers are used to facilitate over 200 internally-developed courses created and reviewed by instructional designers using Quality Matters K-12 design standards (Quality Matters, n.d.). During the 2015-16 school year, over 14,000 students enrolled at this institution part-time to supplement their traditional courses or to recover deficient credits. Most courses are asynchronous and self-paced, allowing students to progress through their courses at a desirable speed. Course structures vary by subject area, with most containing elements of student-teacher and student-student interaction (e.g., discussion boards).

Participants

Data was gathered from seven teachers working in an online K-12 school during the fall of 2016, although two of them also taught at other online schools (which followed a more synchronous model of online learning). Each participant varied by subject taught, years of traditional teaching experience (0 to 20 years), and years of completed online teaching experience (0 to 4 years), resulting in seven unique cases. Below we briefly describe some essential details about each case.

Abby. As a first-year online teacher, Abby also taught world languages at two traditional schools. Abby's case illustrates how new online teachers may develop concerns in an online environment, and how those concerns may be influenced by traditional teaching experience.

Athena. Athena worked full-time with her online institution as a teacher and department lead, requiring her to perform additional tasks including course reviews, teacher evaluations, and course design. At the end of the final interview, Athena reported she had just resigned her teaching job to assume a new administrative role within the same institution. Athena's case is significant as her administrative duties and responsibilities introduced unique concerns.

Emily. Emily experienced severe administrative problems in her traditional teaching positions which led her to explore online teaching. As a fourth-year online teacher, Emily represented one of the more seasoned online teachers in this study and demonstrated how experienced teachers may encounter concerns.

Jackie. Jackie was interested in online teaching as a way to continue working while staying home with her children. She taught part-time at two online institutions, which illustrated the potential influence of an organization's structure, policies, and practices on the concerns of teachers.

Jacob. Driven to online teaching in order to prove that "online learning was not conducive to foreign language," Jacob quickly became convinced that online learning was an effective educational option for students. Jacob worked as a part-time world languages teacher in addition to his role as an administrator in a traditional school district. Jacob provided a unique perspective of an experienced teacher with various institutional roles.

Katie. Katie came into online teaching with only a year of traditional teaching experience and was in her second year of online teaching. She taught full-time at one online institution and part-time in another institution. Katie's case provides an example of how novice teachers experience concerns in an online setting.

Leah. A lack of available teaching positions led Leah into the field of online teaching. Leah was hired as part of a two-year teacher development program aimed at preparing new teachers for future employment in traditional class settings. Her role in this program was significant as it framed a great deal of the concerns she experienced as an online teacher. During this study, Leah also obtained additional part-time employment in a non-education field.

While other K-12 online teachers within this organization or at other institutions may share similar concerns with the participants in this study, the findings presented hereafter are highly contextualized by the personal experiences of the participants and the culture and practices of their institution.

Data Collection

Participants engaged in a two-stage interview process and a bi-monthly journaling exercise to reveal their concerns as online teachers (one completed the second interview via email due to intervening family circumstances).

The initial interview focused on contextualizing the participant's experience with online teaching by exploring relevant background information, educational training, and traditional teaching experiences, and also examined online teaching experiences and concerns. In the concluding interview, the participant was directed to a particular quote or experience and asked to clarify, restructure, or add emphasis to elucidate meaning of their experience.

In their bimonthly online journal entry, participants provided detail about their current concerns and experiences teaching online. These journal entries were completed between August and December 2016. Participants completed between 5-7 journal entries each.

Data Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the interview transcripts and completed journal entries. We began by reading each transcript until the lead researcher had a close familiarity with the participant, the context, and some of the general ideas. Then, the lead researcher read and annotated the text with descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments (Smith, et al., 2009) which extracted key phrases from the data, analyzed participant word choice, and created preliminary interpretative notes, and placed each comment in an additional column. For further analysis, the lead researcher developed a concise, meaningful statement for each comment, checking the original text as needed. Fourth, we explored relationships between these newly-created statements, and clustered them into themes and sub-themes. Finally, each theme was checked with the transcript to ensure it could properly be categorized.

Each participant was analyzed individually before they were considered collectively. The first case analysis resulted in themes used to analyze the remaining transcripts, while also considering the emergence of new themes. A master table of themes from all participants was produced to explore potential cross-case themes and relationships.

To establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we triangulated experiences of multiple online K-12 teachers and used member checking by using the transcripts from the first interview and completed journal entries for further investigation during the second interview. When each case study was completed, a copy was also sent to each participant, allowing them to clarify, dispute, or elaborate on any findings presented in the case. In addition, we sought transparency through the practice of a reflexive journal that documented the decisions, rationale, assumptions, and actions from the initiation of the research to its conclusion. This reflexive journal and related research documents were given to a peer for critique.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 categorizes the various concerns of online teachers represented in the data and their possible relationships. Both the main categories of concerns (personal, instructional, and relational) and the intersections of these main categories (responsibility, experience, and interaction) are represented as themes in this analysis and will also include individual sub-themes and examples from research participants.

Six themes will be hereafter presented in this section, along with multiple sub-themes for each one. A minimum of three teachers were required to respond for these concerns to be reported in this analysis.

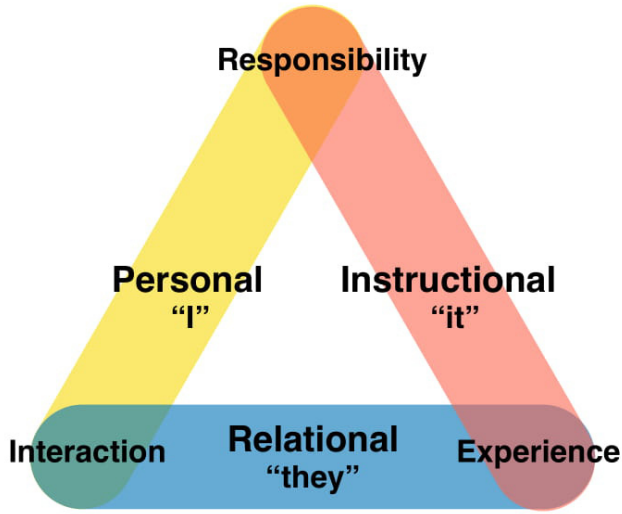

Figure 1. Teacher concerns illustration.

Theme 1: Personal Concerns

Personal concerns, defined as "I" or "me" concerns, stem from the individual's experience and include concerns about job outlook, expectations, evaluations, priorities, and time management.

Sub-theme 1: Job outlook

A questionable future in teaching was a concern for some online teachers. Leah said, "I am concerned about there being a place for me in this new era of public education." These worries seemed to be triggered by recent political appointments in federal offices, a move that she described as "really discouraging." Even in traditional teaching settings, Leah admitted, "I am concerned about keeping my own job . . . any teacher has that concern the way things kind of go nowadays."

Leah's uncertainty in education generally carried into her local teaching context. She said, "I don't dislike [online teaching] to be fair. I just know there's no future at my company, so I've got to be realistic." Part of this concern stemmed from an "uncaring" relationship between her and her organization, resulting in feeling like she was being "[pushed] out the door." Abby was also uncertain about her future with the company but viewed compensation and a lack of full-time online teaching opportunities as major concerns regarding her future.

Recently, Emily's state passed legislation requiring all teachers to have teacher evaluations in the state system in order to renew their teaching credentials. This legislation posed concerns for Emily because her institution is technically a company and not a school. She said, "I do not work for a school; I work for a 503(c) non-profit company. So, I have no evaluations in there, and theoretically could eventually lose my teaching certificate." This legislative action motivated Emily to quickly renew her license at the cost of $2,000. She admitted, "post-2018, it's going to be a very big deal for any teachers that renew after that."

Sub-theme 2: Time management

Jacob reported that "critical attributes" of successful online teachers included the skills of "time management, organization, prioritizing." As a new teacher, Leah admitted to a lack of time to complete required tasks. Leah said that with "eight classes, I don't have four hours to sit there and basically audit a class" to identify and correct missing or broken links. The scarcity of time is aggravated by the fact that some of these teachers had other teaching jobs. Jacob mentioned, "this is a . . . tough season right now . . . especially for those of us who are part-time instructors here, because it's a busy time in our full-time educational profession."

The concern of time also includes the difficulty of balancing personal and work responsibilities which was particularly challenging due to a lack of physical boundaries separating work from home. Jackie noted, "when you leave a brick-and-mortar classroom, you may have work that needs to be completed, but it is easier to understand that work is in addition to regular tasks." The line between personal life and work was difficult for some to distinguish in the absence of a physical work space.

Balancing personal and work responsibilities is challenged by a lack of "school hours." Jacob reported, "there's no . . . 'it starts at 8:00am and it ends at 3:30pm.' . . . I do a lot of my work at . . . you know, 10:00pm, 11:00pm, 12:00am, four in the morning, five in the morning." According to Athena, it was also difficult to help others understand teacher-created time boundaries because the "hours that you are available appear to be 24 hours a day."

For Jackie, a stay-at-home mom who reported work-life balance to be "the hardest thing about being an online teacher," her work created a sense of urgency that encroached into her personal life. "I might be in the middle of something and I get an email and I want to answer it immediately." For Jackie, she admitted that she "always feel[s] that pressure."

Theme 2: Responsibility

At the intersection of the personal and instructional themes is the theme of responsibility, which considers the potential concerns of teachers as they engage with the course content and the learning environment.

Sub-theme 1: Teacher roles

Teachers frequently mentioned the lack of influence they have on the content and organization of their courses. The organization provides online teachers with a set curriculum (i.e., content, assessments, grading system), thereby eliminating the teacher's instructional design role. While some teachers appreciated this, they bemoaned the lack of course control. Jackie stated, "I think my biggest concern with [the organization] would probably be not having any influence over the content." Katie reported, "we could just make it so much better, and it would be so much less confusing . . . You have all of that control in a brick and mortar (school)."

Teachers were instead reduced to creating extra materials that students may be "intrinsically motivated to do" (Katie). Without the ability to add or modify assignments and include them in the gradebook, these teacher resources often went unused. "Most of the time the student has not used the tools I have created. In order to help students succeed in my class, I have created many . . . assignment directions and examples, study guides, and even video tutorials," Katie reported. This under-utilization of teacher-created resources was one of Katie's "biggest gripes."

This lack of content control impacted how teachers viewed themselves and their roles in the teaching environment. Jackie was concerned that her own skills were not fully utilized in the online teaching environment. She said, "the first few months teaching online I felt like my only role was to grade work and hope students read my feedback and learned from it." Her concern regarding her role as an online teacher came from "not using as many of the skills" she developed as a teacher to help students. "I can't look at the data, identify a weakness, and then teach a lesson specifically to address this deficit the way you would in a normal classroom."

Sub-theme 2: Teacher grading responsibilities

Because online learning lacks time boundaries, students can work and submit assignments at any time. Katie admitted, "I still wake up sometimes on Monday and I'm like, 'ahhh!' because the kids can work over the weekend and I'm swarmed." Jacob reported that weeks leading up to the end of the semester were particularly overwhelming as students worked feverishly to catch up. Jacob refers to these final weeks of the course as "grading marathons" as students submitted assignments "by the buckets."

The "grading-intensive" (Katie) weeks were worsened for some teachers by additional organizational responsibilities. Athena also worked on various administrative tasks including developing courses, trainings, and professional development for teachers. Often, she admitted to feeling "pulled in many different directions." She said, "I work to keep students first and give them my very best . . . It's difficult to maintain balance between students and instructors." A frequent late-night schedule left Athena feeling exhausted: "And I've had some really late nights, and that's not like me . . . I have been beat."

Theme 3: Instructional

Instructional concerns include ideas such as course quality and technology, and could be described as "it" concerns, or concerns originating in the instructional environment.

Sub-theme 1: Technology

The infusion of technology into the learning environment led to some concerns. Abby described herself as "pretty good with technology," but admitted to concerns with her organization's "cumbersome" learning management system, which prevented her from personalizing the course. While Jacob's teaching philosophy mirrored a mastery approach to learning, the learning management system was set up to operate within a traditional grading system with "previous work . . . counting against" students. Jacob often changed or removed earlier grades if competency on the same principle was demonstrated on later assignments, a lengthy and cumbersome process.

Emily experienced a significant concern with the auto-graded function of her organization's learning management system. The auto-graded function was character specific, meaning that unless a student composed the answer in the exact prescribed way, the question would be marked incorrect adding to an instructor's workload as they manually re-grade questions.

Sub-theme 2: Course quality

The content of the courses, including their functionality and relevance, was a significant concern. Katie noted conversations with coworkers in which they "agonized" over the current course situation and hoped that the organization would improve the courses. She said, "It hurts knowing that I have to use something that I don't think is the best."

The outdated nature of some courses, some of which were purchased from course vendors, was a major challenge to course quality. For example, Emily reported that the social media course still mentioned Myspace as the biggest social network. Courses often required her to "(make) sure that those classes are not only content-wise accurate, meeting all the standards and whatever, but . . . that the way that they're presented is with the times."

Outdated courses also suffered from broken links and unavailable resources leaving "holes and gaps in the content" (Katie). After a while, these gaps were filled by the organization, but these fixes were also problematic. In one of Leah's courses, the replacement content "isn't an exact match" leading to a poor alignment between content and assessment. "Kids just bomb [the test]. And it's not their fault."

Jackie believed that course quality was further challenged by courses "[focused] too much on throwing facts at students and not enough time teaching them how to learn." As a teacher interested on teaching skills, Jackie found that "a lot of the soft skills I have a hard time teaching asynchronously," admitting the value of synchronous sessions at her other institution. Emphasizing the right content was especially challenging when an online institution is focused too much on credit recovery. Jackie continued, "a lot of times when you get into remediation, they try to dense down to do credit recovery."

Theme 4: Experience

At the intersection of instructional and relational concerns lies the theme of experience, specifically the challenging and difficult experience of others, particularly students, within the learning environment.

Sub-theme 1: Student enrollment and placement

Leah noted that the open enrollment period for the online institution was four weeks long. She described, "there are new students in my courses that are already four weeks behind their peers." Emily agreed: "In week one I could have the kids start week one, day one, and I could have a kid be enrolled in week four, day five." In addition, even with early enrollments, there was no guarantee that students would be placed in the appropriate courses. As a language teacher, Jacob's courses typically required students to master the concepts and skills in an earlier course in order to have success. However, without placement tests, and because not all schools are adequately aligned to the state core, there was no guarantee that students would be positioned at the appropriate course level.

Sub-theme 2: Student movement

The movement and pacing of a student through the course was a common concern. "I have a handful of students right now who have never logged in to their class," Emily reported. "We're in week eight. And there's only so much I can do." Athena was "surprised at how many students are moving slowly at the beginning of the course," but admitted that this was not "terribly unusual." With students enrolling at different times and at different paces, Athena acknowledged that "instead of having a class of thirty kids, I have 30 classes of one kid . . . for that subject."

As the end of the semester approached, many teachers reported an increased pace of student activity. “There have been kids, oh my goodness, who will not work the whole semester and then the last week they’ll try to do the whole class. And their work is really good. And I’m like, ‘What are you doing?’” The challenge in these situations was that student’s frantic end-of-semester pace often limited the learning experience. “It’s not unusual for high school students to start slowly and pick up once they feel a bit more pressure,” Athena admitted, “but I work to prevent that since working at the last minute is not the best for learning.”

Students’ rush to complete coursework also rushed instructor’s assignment feedback and reduced the likelihood that feedback will be utilized on later assignments. Leah reported that “my feedback doesn’t help them prepare for quizzes or tests, and that they are less likely to be learning the material than they are to be regurgitating facts for a test and forgetting about it.”

For many teachers, student attendance seemed to be one of the greatest hindrances to student progress. Jackie admitted that attendance “is always a problem,” but poor attendance in online settings seemed to be “more unmanageable”. “If they’re not logging in, if they’re not there, it’s really hard to reach out to them,” Jackie admitted. Inconsistent student attendance created the feeling that “[teacher’s] hands are tied more.” Jackie described a situation with a particular student who was reputably hard working and competent by her parents and mentors but failed to log into the class. “when you run into situations like that, it’s frustrating because . . . there’s only so much I can do.” Emily echoed this helpless feeling: “online, if that kid doesn’t show up, I can’t do much. I can reach out . . . you have to reply.”

Sub-theme 3: Student experience

For some students, the difficulty of the course began with the content. While Katie noted that most students exhibit a great deal of excitement for new languages at the beginning, they also discovered the challenge of learning a language. “[The language is] like . . . five out of five difficulty for native English speakers to learn. And they either embrace that challenge, or they muddle through to get a grade, or they give up.”

Some teachers reported other concerns about student learning. Jackie doubted how compatible the course content was with what she felt students needed to learn to be successful in life. Jackie reflected, “at the end of the day, is it really teaching them what they need to know? . . . My students are spending so much time cramming material, selecting an answer on a multiple choice, and then immediately forgetting it again. I worry how this will translate to the world.” Leah sympathized with her students simply by saying “I felt bad for [students] because they’re not getting what they should be getting from [the course].”

Theme 5: Relational

Relational, or "they" concerns, deal with the concerns emerging from the experiences of others (i.e., students, mentors, parents) as they engage in the instructional environment.

Sub-theme 1: Student mentor concerns

The online institution in this study utilized student mentors to encourage, support, and guide the student in their online experience. While these student mentors were typically teachers, counselors, or administrators at the traditional schools the students attended, how this mentoring program was implemented and organized often varied from school to school. Athena explained,

> Some students have one hour a day devoted to their course at school, and the mentor is there with them. Others never see their mentor but are assigned someone in the building. Some mentors have a few students they are responsible for, and some have hundreds of students they are supposed to work with.

Jacob spoke of mentors who have "300 kids." The organization of student mentors "can lead to differences in the student's experience and completion rate" and "in the success of students," according to Athena.

As a former student mentor, Jacob, stated that many mentors are not really "set up to be operating as mentors." He said, "they're labeled as mentors but they're more 'monitors' than they are 'mentors.'" Jacob admitted that mentor priorities are often different than those of the online teachers. "For us instructors, that student is our priority. For those mentors . . . they're really looking at their job . . . as compliance." Leah also acknowledged that "some of the mentors just don't even seem to know how to use the courses themselves." Leah worried, "how can they help the kids if they can't even do anything?" She mentioned that training mentors to be able to "have a basic understanding" and to "how to view students' grades" was critical.

Sub-theme 2: Student concerns

These online teachers were keenly aware of the major challenges students endured including medical issues, learning disabilities, economic distress, and social anxiety, among many others. Katie admitted, "A lot of them are just in very interesting situations that I might find sad or horrible, or just worrisome." In addition to teaching students who were "second or third chance students," Jackie reported "75-80% of my students have an IEP or

some other health care problem."

The lack of necessary skills in some students was concerning for some teachers. Katie mentioned, "I have had some students who do not do well in an online setting, because there's not enough structure. . . They are responsible for their own learning, and that's tough." Emily described the missing skillset for students may be organizational skills. "I don't want to say lack of motivation, but maybe lack of organizational skills. Most 16-year olds . . . if they keep an agenda planner, don't pay attention to it."

One specific characteristic mentioned was the importance of student confidence. Comparing student confidence to a plate, Emily metaphorized, "You can have a plate, and if you drop it, you can piece it back together. It can look whole, but it's still broken. And that's how I felt about kids' confidence." Even when the plate is pieced back together, Emily admitted, "it's not the same as if it was never broken to begin with. And it takes a lot more work to build a kid up than it does to break them down." Katie found in her teaching that "many students . . . may not attempt an assignment due to the feeling that they will fail."

Jackie, an online teacher at two institutions, was quick to draw comparisons between the different student populations served by each of her online institutions, illuminating the impact of organizational factors on relational concerns.

> [Institution A] I work for . . . is an at-risk school. These are students who failed out of a regular school. They didn't do well and so now they're doing online education. So, a lot of them don't have those skills and they need reinforcement. Whereas I find a lot of my [Institution B] students, they have the skills.

The lack of skills with some of these students caused Jackie to "pull more from [her] arsenal" to help her students be successful than when she was teaching in at-risk, urban traditional schools. Despite the population differences between schools, Jackie admitted, "they're just still teenagers who need that kind of guidance."

While the concerns described in this section may not be entirely unique to online teaching, the flexibility of online education attracts students with challenging circumstances who may struggle in traditional learning environments.

Theme 6: Interaction

At the intersection of relational and personal concerns lies the theme of interaction, which considers how online teachers experience concern as they

engage in meaningful interaction with others in the learning environment.

Sub-theme 1: Communication

The importance of parental interaction was mentioned by several teachers and often cited as problematic due to limited access to contact information. Emily described the experience of obtaining this information as "pulling teeth," requiring her to "beg and plead for contact information". Athena explained that school districts prefer that teacher communication "go through the district." Emily surveyed her students at the beginning of the year and asked for parent contact information but acknowledged that students may sometimes set the parent email as their own personal email "so when I think I could be emailing a parent, the kid sets it up so it goes right to them. It's like intercepting the mail in the mailbox."

In the absence of face-to-face interactions, online teachers often rely on email, phone calls, and texts to effectively communicate with students. However, these modalities are not commonly used between teachers and students in traditional learning environments. "It can be weird to call your teacher, or to have your teacher say, 'Hey, text me.' . . . So, it's getting the kids to take that step over that line that might feel weird," Emily acknowledged. "It's getting them to meet me halfway and say, 'Alright, I'll text you back,' or, 'I'll answer that phone call.' Because they don't call their teachers. They don't text their teachers. So, it's a little weird until you break down that barrier."

Athena reported that trying to communicate with students was like "talking to a brick wall." In the online environment, "it can be easy for them to ignore the instructor." Emily noted, "if I say, 'Hey, are you stuck on this problem because you don't get it, or because you don't want to do it?' I have to get a response from the kid to get that answer. I can't guess." Abby echoed that "knowing how [students are] struggling" was one of the hardest aspects about limited communication and admitted that she could "probably be helping them a lot more if I had more communication with them."

Sub-theme 2: Relationships

Katie mentioned, "when you're in online, it's much harder to just connect, reach out, talk to people, because you aren't in the same physical space with them." Jacob admitted, "relationship building . . . the care and the affection, the sincerity in person are so much easier [face-to-face] because the smile the empathy can all be communicated through non-verbals." Leah acknowledged she was unable to be as "personal" with her students despite her efforts to "build some kind of sort of relationship with the kids." For Athena, the difference in relationships represented a sad reality of online teaching that she missed. "I do miss those connections where . . . they get you and you know, you're willing to work well together."

While there are likely numerous reasons why relationship building online is difficult, several teachers mentioned the possibility that some students may be uninterested in forming relationships with teachers. “A lot of kids kind of seem to like the anonymity that comes with being online,” Athena noted. “Kids might still just hold back either because they’re not interested, or they don’t need that from the instructor, or they just want to get stuff done.” Leah stated succinctly, “[students are] just there to get a grade. They don’t care.”

While student-teacher relationships appeared important for these teachers, some proposed that these relationships may also benefit students. When those connections exist, “you get that student and they get you and you know, you’re willing to work well together,” Athena stated. Emily believed that personal connections help teachers push their students. “It’s a little bit harder that way when you don’t have that personal connection to say, ‘Okay, why aren’t you doing your homework?’”

CONCLUSION

This study explored concerns of seven online K-12 teachers from a single online institution in the Midwestern United States, who came from different content areas with varied levels of teaching experience in both online and traditional settings. The major themes considered in this analysis (personal, instructional, and relational), along with their intersecting themes (responsibility, experience, and interaction) correspond generally to the self, task, and student categories of concerns developed by Fuller (1970).

While the participants in the current study experienced many of the same categories of concerns, they did not experience them in the same regular and predictable sequence as proposed by Fuller (1970). The participants in this study exhibited no such patterns when comparing novice online teachers with experienced teachers. Rather, teachers’ individual cases were irregular and unpredictable based on teaching experience alone. For example, three second-year teachers, Jackie, Katie, and Leah, all manifested vastly different concerns that could not be accounted for merely by years of teaching experience. The three teachers with the most experience, Emily, Jacob, and Athena, also refuted the model as they all experienced a significant number of personal and instructional concerns. Additionally, all teachers generally experienced a high level of concern for students and their learning despite their years of teaching experience. In general, the pattern of progression from self-concerns, to task concerns, to concerns about students cannot be fully supported by the participants in this study.

Despite these findings, the conclusions we draw are limited due to various methodological factors. First, this research included participants from

a single online institution, which followed an independent study model of online education. Drawing participants from different schools may have illuminated different patterns of concerns. Second, research was limited to a small number of participants who responded to email invitations. Including more participants may have provided some helpful cases to discover new concerns. Third, this study was limited to the first half of the school year. A more longitudinal study may have illuminated new concerns at different times of the year or provided added insight into the pervasiveness and persistence of various teacher concerns over time. Fourth, none of the teachers had taught online for five years, a fact that keeps all participants in the beginner teacher phase (Ingersoll, 2003). To understand how teachers transition in their online teaching concerns over time, we would need to study teachers with a longer online teaching history—a difficult task in an emerging profession.

Future research could explore the dispositions and characteristics of online teachers that enable them to persist and succeed despite serious concerns, as well as what support structures are most helpful in overcoming them. This paper also discussed the possible impact of teacher concerns on teacher attrition and retention challenges, a topic unexplored in the current research. It is unknown if the same attrition problems that plague the traditional education system affects online education. Online K-12 education, while still an emerging field, should begin to provide insight into the career mobility and attrition patterns of online teachers. Such research could provide valuable information to be used in program and organizational design in both online and traditional K-12 settings.

Implications for Practice

The themes presented in this study present practical implications for teacher education programs and hiring institutions. Although most of the online teachers in this study hoped to remain in their online teaching positions, several teachers were uncertain that continued employment or job growth was possible. Therefore, educational institutions should be aware of the transmodal teacher, or the teacher who moves between online and traditional teaching environments due to changes in their organization or in personal circumstances. Institutions should support the development of skills that will be applicable in both modalities.

The current practice of using online teachers as facilitators of pre-developed courses presents concerns for some teachers that may have implications for hiring institutions. In this study, teachers were both concerned by a lack of control of course content and relieved by having fewer responsibilities. Online institutions should consider this complex tradeoff and determine how teacher responsibilities for course curriculum should be balanced

so teachers can deliver the highest quality learning experience to students, keep teacher workload at a manageable level, and enjoy some professional fulfillment from pedagogical autonomy.

The results of the current research suggest that teacher preparation programs and online teaching organizations should be more focused on identifying and resolving the current, relevant concerns of online teachers. Additionally, as new online programs emerge and existing programs continue to develop, policies and practices at an organizational level should be established only after careful consideration of their impact on teachers. While this study illuminates the experience at a single online K-12 institution, a similar inquiry of teachers concerns by institution leaders will yield promising findings and implications tailored to their specific organizational context.

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