A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Parents Choosing Remote Learning for Their High School Students During the COVID-10 Pandemic

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS CHOOSING REMOTE LEARNING FOR THEIR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

By
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A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of
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Abstract

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS CHOOSING REMOTE LEARNING FOR THEIR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Aaron J. Bearinger, Ed.D.
University of Nebraska, 2021
Advisor: Dr. Tami Williams

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the educational system at the end of the 2019-20 school year and into the 2020-21 school year. Lockdowns of schools meant a shift to emergency remote learning. So as the 2020-21 school year began, parents had to make choices about the best educational experience for their student(s). Parents in the research study’s district had the option of continuing with remote learning or sending students back into the physical classroom. This phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of parents with multiple students at the high school level choosing the remote learning option. The findings show the struggles and the successes of the parents that had children learning in a virtual setting. The recommendations for educational leaders and parents include removing remote learning barriers, monitoring student mental health concerns, and using remote learning to create flexibility for future student learners.
Dedication

I dedicate this research to my family. First and foremost, to my wife Erin. Erin has been my rock through this whole process and was the motivator to help me get to the finish line. To my daughters, Grace, Ella and Olivia - the number of long days working late or not being able to “play” with you were too many and very difficult. No matter what my mood was, you were always by my side rooting me on. Thank you! Also to my mom Jeanette, who is my number one fan - you have held a steadfast belief that I am the best at everything and you have instilled the confidence in me to complete this journey. To my dad Doug - you have always provided the critical eye I have needed to make myself better. You never allowed me to settle for okay, you made me the best version of myself. To my in-laws Jim and Kathy - you have always believed in me and were helpful along the journey whether it was taking the girls or providing information on an article you read. To Colby - your friendship means the world to me and your constant yearning for us both to be doctors was unwavering.

The final product would not be a reality without the support of my administrative team colleagues, Brian, Susan, Mary, Amber and Chad. You have lifted me up and encouraged me to finish even when I was not in the best mood. To Kelly Welsh, who helped assure me I could make it to the finish line. Tami Williams, thank you for your honest conversations and your ability to help me move along this process. Kurt Frederick, your skill to edit and provide great feedback was the final touch I needed.

I dedicate this research to all the teachers, parents and students that had to endure education during the COVID-19 pandemic and will deal with its impact for years to come.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

In March of 2020, the daily routine of school changed dramatically for parents, students and teachers, as schools in 150 countries had to shut down face-to-face learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gideon, 2020). The task of educating children fundamentally shifted because of the limitations placed on face-to-face instruction. Teachers had to scramble to find new strategies to deliver content in a virtual environment (Hylton-Fraser & Hylton, 2021). Parents took on an enhanced role in the educational process of their children by providing an environment suitable to online learning, motivation to complete work and a supervision of the work completed (Angelico, 2020). Family dining rooms were transformed into areas of learning, and parents acted as paraprofessionals to assist teachers in the delivery of instruction.

One study conducted in April of 2020 reported that “78% of parents surveyed said they were currently educating their child at home due to COVID-19” (Lee et al., 2020, p. 3). Concerns about learning gaps and student engagement while learning remotely became concerns that parents and school leaders had to address (Reimers, 2020). School districts adapted and provided grace for students as parents dealt with this new reality. School districts offered pass/fail grades, and COVID-19 accelerated the growing trend of colleges and universities going test-optional and eliminating a barrier to admission (Korn et al., 2020).

Online learning opportunities for students will continue to expand as technology improves and educational leaders figure out the best strategies to create economies of
scale. Zoom, an online video meeting software, was introduced to millions of educators, students, and parents across the world as a new instructional delivery platform for education. It quickly became a powerful new tool for teachers, parents, and students, but one they had to learn to navigate. It was awkward in the beginning, but teachers and students quickly figured out the benefits and features of this application in an effort to mirror the traditional educational environment. Soon, students were showing their parents how Zoom worked, and teachers were using this new platform to conference with parents for special education meetings, academic progress meetings and even parent teacher conferences. There was a sense of relief as the 2019-20 school year came to a close, even though uncertainty of the upcoming school year still remained.

As the pandemic continued and the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States soared, schools had to make difficult decisions on how to best start the 2020-21 school year. Many school districts chose to offer 100% remote learning going into the 2020-21 school year. The 100% remote learning option meant that students learned in an online format using a laptop or some other connected device. Other districts near the research study landed on a 3-2 hybrid model, which combined alternating days of in-person learning and remote learning. A student would attend class face-to-face based on their last name on Monday, Wednesday and Friday of one week, and then learn remotely on Tuesday and Thursday. The following week, the same student would learn remotely on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and attend school in a face-to-face format on Tuesday and Thursday. Another option that was popular in the area where the research study was conducted was to offer parents and students a choice between a face-to-face instructional model and a remote learning option. Students could choose to attend all
classes like normal in the classroom or attend online through synchronous teaching and learning. Allowing parents the opportunity to choose between face-to-face learning and remote learning created an inconsistency with the student’s educational experience between the students online and those that were in the physical classroom. School districts struggled to find the right balance that would meet the needs of all learners, and at the same time, ease the fears parents had about sending their students into a crowded school. Ultimately, school leaders did what they thought was best for their communities.

Millions of parents had to make a choice about what learning for their child would look like when school started back in session. The obvious concern that parents had to face was the possibility of their child contracting the COVID-19 virus. With very little known about the virus, it was difficult for parents to make an informed decision between face-to-face learning and remote learning, so many parents chose the most cautious path for their child and kept them home to continue learning in a virtual environment.

However, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) found remote learning to be more challenging than those without an IEP due to lack of routines and support (Becker et al., 2020). Having a paraprofessional to help assist with learning or having a test read to a student were services that were not always able to be accommodated for students on an IEP that chose remote learning.

Isolation from peers, teachers, and coaches was a reality children faced during the pandemic and one that parents had to figure out a way to manage (Soland et al., 2020). For some students, the isolation at home made it more difficult to ask teachers for help or to be fully engaged in a lesson. Other parents found it challenging to have multiple people living under one room all trying to learn online in a synchronous way.
Inequalities across districts and households became apparent and district leaders scrambled to quickly find ways to close the technology divide (Angelico, 2020). Other parents had to worry about the anxiety of being out of work or trying to schedule work while also having to care for children that were now home full-time (Lee et al., 2020). Parents had to be flexible and adapt to this new reality, and as parents, students, and school leaders reflected on the lived experience of the first year of the pandemic, a clearer picture of the difficult situation parents had to incur was investigated.

This study used a phenomenological approach to understand the daily lived experience of parents during the pandemic. Phenomenology is a research method that tries to understand a phenomenon by investigating those who have lived through the experience (Van Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology looks specifically at the narratives of individuals and their experience within a phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). The viewpoint of the parent is important because parents had to take a more active role in the educational process of their children, and this led to increased anxiety and parental stress, (Lee et al., 2020). A better understanding of the parental process of student learning in the home setting can have implications on future attempts to facilitate learning from home, whether it be on a temporary basis, like a snow day, or something more permanent as was experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic. It will also be important to understand what the lasting impact for both students and parents will be as we move beyond the pandemic. The dynamic between parents and educators might need to be redefined as technology becomes more of a reality in the daily lives of students and alters the physical location of learning.

**Problem Statement**
During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents went from a passive role in their child’s daily educational experience to an active role (Angelico, 2020). The scales of the involvement of educators and parents in a child’s education tipped more to the parents during the pandemic because of remote learning experiences. Schools being forced to shut their doors meant parents had to figure out ways of providing an educational setting in their home that would be conducive to learning in an online environment (Hylton-Fraser & Hylton, 2021). A better understanding of the parental experience during this heightened state of educational involvement will help lead to better strategies for this type of setting in the future and help us better understand what gaps in learning might be present with current students. Trial and error adjustments made in the moment were used to refine the process and make the most out of the first few months of learning in this new paradigm (Lee et al., 2020).

As the 2019-2020 school year progressed, educators adapted to the challenges of teaching during the pandemic and developed new strategies to help students learn both in traditional and non-traditional settings. Then at the start of the 2020-21 school year, parents were given the choice to allow their student(s) to continue to learn remotely or to return to the physical classroom. Parents had to weigh many factors when determining what was best for each of their children. One out of every four parents at the research site chose to continue with remote learning for their children.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study gathered information through parental interviews of the lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic of parents that chose remote learning instead of returning to in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year. The educational collaboration between schools and homes was examined to better
understand how to support remote learning strategies in the future. Common themes were extrapolated from the transcripts to determine what major impacts remote learning had on the educational landscape. Member checking was utilized to make sure that the interpretation of the participants’ transcripts aligned with the intended message the parent was attempting to communicate. It is important to understand the role of the parent, as the research on parental involvement in education lags behind that of student and teacher engagement.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of parents with multiple high school students who chose the remote learning option instead of returning to the physical classroom for the 2020-21 school year. By interviewing parents of remote learning students, this study revealed a better understanding of the phenomenon of parents’ role in the education of their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. If the dynamic of education continues to shift to more online learning formats, it will be vital to understand how parents can employ strategies that will best support their children and work in a collaborative way with schools. This research connected the themes that are common among the parents of remote learners to illuminate the experiences remote learners had in a suburban, Midwestern high school.

**Central Question**

The hermeneutic phenomenological study researched the following questions and sub-questions:

1. What is the lived experience of parents who have multiple high school students participating in remote learning?
1A. What factors influenced parents to choose remote learning for their children?

1B. What does a typical day look like for a parent of remote learners?

**Definitions**

The subjects of this study were parents of multiple remote learners during the 2020-21 school year. At the time of this dissertation, Fall 2021, remote learning using digital tools outside of a traditional school building is still somewhat new and not part of our daily practices. Contextual definitions are listed below for further understanding.

- **Asynchronous learning**: Learning that does not occur in real-time but as the student’s schedule permits (Lin, 2017).
- **COVID-19 pandemic**: A worldwide epidemic caused by COVID-19, a respiratory disease discovered in 2019 that appears to spread mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- **Face-to-face learning**: learning that happens in a physical, brick and mortar classroom with teacher-student presence (Mullen, 2020).
- **Remote learning**: The educational facilitation of instruction and assessment using the internet either synchronously or asynchronously.
- **Synchronous learning**: The facilitation of an online communication tool between teacher and student that is in real-time and replicates the classroom setting (Lim, 2017).
- **Zoom**: Zoom unifies cloud video conferencing, simple online meetings, group messaging, and a software-defined conference room solution into one easy-to-use platform (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2021).
Delimitations

Several factors were purposely considered as delimiting factors of this phenomenological study. The two main categories included: (a) participants and (b) setting. The participants under consideration for this study only consisted of parents who had multiple students choosing the remote learning option. This delimiting factor was decided upon in order to get a more robust view into the world of the parents navigating the remote learning experience with their children. Assumptions were made that parents with multiple remote learners might be more involved in the daily process of learning with their children. The decision to choose this set of participants also might have unknowingly eliminated parents in a lower socioeconomic demographic.

The setting of this research focused on one high school with a population of 2500 students. This high school setting is unique because of the percentage of students that participated in remote learning. At peak occurrences throughout the school year, over 20% of the students in this high school were remote learners. This school gave parents the choice between remote learning or having the student participate in face-to-face learning. Remote learning occurred synchronously at the scheduled intervals that the student had class and attendance was recorded. Most teachers in this high school used a combination of Google Classroom and Zoom to facilitate instruction.

Limitations

The limitations of this phenomenological study include: (a) sample size; (b) time limitations; and (c) setting. Phenomenological studies are a subset of qualitative research, and the primary source of data collection is an interview with research participants. Therefore, it is difficult to interview all possible participants and a small sample size has
to be used. The small sample size might be indicative of a larger population, but it creates a limitation of generalizability.

Another limitation considered was the time limitation of this study. The pandemic started to have an impact on education in March of 2020. With the increase in the number of vaccinations and schools starting to return back to pre-pandemic operations, there was a limited amount of time to complete the research. If students are forced to return to school and a remote learning option is no longer available, then the setting of the learning and the parental involvement will shift back more heavily to teachers.

Due to the nature of hermeneutic phenomenological research, it is difficult to generalize the data collected, analyze it and then project it into other situations (Peoples, 2021). The ability to replicate this study would not be possible, but the themes that emerge from the study could possibly be applied to other areas of educational decision making.

**Significance of the Study**

This hermeneutic phenomenological study looked to gather insights into the daily lives of parents who had children at home learning remotely instead of in the school setting. Insights into the collaboration between parents and educators and how it affected student learning in a remote setting will have future implications on the educational world, as more opportunities open up for students to learn in an online setting.

This study is significant because it will help educators reflect on the challenges of supporting students learning in a remote setting and how they collaborated with parents
to attempt to make the experience successful academically. The study also provided insights for parents that could help better prepare their children for online learning experiences in the future. This study revealed which strategies were used by parents and students to be academically successful in the remote learning process and which areas failed to meet the needs of the learners. The pedagogy of teachers and parents will be forever changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this study will help shed light on successes and struggles faced by parents taking on more responsibility for their children’s education.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The aim of this research study was to understand the experience of parents choosing remote learning for their children during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the parent experiences will help support parents and educational leaders if the remote format is required in the future or chosen as an option by parents. It will also help educational leaders better understand what lessons were learned and how they can be applied, even as students return to a physical building. There has been research on the pandemic and its effects on the educational landscape; however, much of the research has focused on teachers and students. The research on the parent experience during the COVID-19 pandemic is limited, and is explored more in-depth outside the United States. The literature reviewed for this study encompassed the most recent studies on how parents, students, teachers and the entire educational field dealt with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This review of literature also looked at alternative forms of education that existed prior to the pandemic. The following literature review was divided into sections based on the limited research that existed on the impact the pandemic had on the educational world, specifically the circumstances facing parents and students. The sections explored in the literature review fell into the following categories: how COVID-19 altered the delivery of education, the technology divide, the at-home learning experience, mental health factors influencing students prior to and during the pandemic, and the exploration of alternatives to traditional face-to-face educational practices.
How the COVID-19 Pandemic Altered the Delivery of Education

In March of 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic. This declaration and subsequent school closings fundamentally altered the process of education around the world (Bansak & Starr, 2020; Lee, 2021). Students left the school buildings one day, not knowing it would be several months before they would physically return to classrooms. The closure of schools meant educators had to reconsider how they delivered instruction in order to continue providing for the educational needs of students (Bansak & Starr, 2020). School districts varied in their approaches to continue to meet the educational needs of their students during this unprecedented time. Packets of assignments were created in some districts while other districts switched to emergency online remote learning. Some districts shutdown completely. Almost nine in ten public schools in the United States had some form of learning that they required of students, whether it was packets or online learning (Gross & Opalka, 2020). However, just 30% of districts made it a requirement for teachers to provide direct instruction or monitor academic performance (Gross & Opalka, 2020).

The formats schools utilized in the initial weeks of the pandemic varied dramatically, which created inconsistencies in the learning experiences for students (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). Students in one district might use a very different learning format than those in a neighboring district. Many schools shifted to emergency remote learning. Emergency remote learning required a teacher to use a video streaming platform like Zoom to deliver real-time instructions to students while they watched on their computer, tablets or phones (Khlafet al., 2021). It was termed “emergency”
because it was setup quickly to meet the needs of student learning for a temporary period of time. (Erdem-Aydin, 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021).

Online, virtual or remote learning is not something new in the educational world; however, the implementation of these pedagogical approaches can take several years to be fully implemented into an educational setting (Khlaif et al., 2021). Educational leaders had weeks instead of years to integrate remote learning into the daily routines of students, so that learning could continue in some form. This created dramatic learning curves for teachers on the front lines trying to deliver lessons in the emergency remote format (Erdem-Aydin, 2021). It was not as simple as a teacher taking the lessons they had and moving them online. Most teachers had to familiarize themselves with new technologies like Zoom to provide real-time online instruction. Teachers also had to rely more heavily on products like Google Classroom to help facilitate the process of learning for students who were not physically in the schools.

Synchronous learning was the experience that most closely resembled the physical classroom experience (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Lim, 2017). Synchronous learning required students to attend class virtually at the assigned times they would have attended classes in the physical classroom. Examples of synchronous learning tools include: video conferencing, audio conferencing, live chat, white boarding and application sharing (Lim, 2017). Asynchronous learning allowed greater flexibility for teachers and students. With asynchronous learning, teachers create an assignment that students complete at their own pace instead of in real time. Examples of asynchronous learning include: discussion forums, web logs, e-mail messaging and social media messaging. The asynchronous learning option helped older students who had to assist
younger students with online learning. If a parent was not in the home, then an older student might miss synchronous instruction if they were also helping an elementary age sibling get connected to their classes.

Student access to the technology needed to learn online varied from district to district. School districts that were already providing laptops or tablets to students could make the switch to remote learning more seamlessly (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). Districts that had not previously provided devices to students, quickly scrambled to purchase devices and hotspots so students could connect to the online learning. The overwhelming demand for devices left school districts and parents waiting weeks to get access to the resources needed to learn online and created a divide among students that had the devices needed to learn and those that were still waiting to get connected.

The Digital Divide

The enhancement of technology in the last two decades has made it easier for students to attend school in forms other than the physical school setting. But a glaring issue that was present prior to the pandemic became one of the biggest challenges to providing online learning during the pandemic - the disparity of technology available to every student. This has become known as the digital divide (Bozkurt, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the awareness of the digital divide as many school districts moved education online (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). Public schools in affluent areas of the United States had less of an issue getting their students the devices they needed or the necessary connection to continuing learning in this new way (Williams et al., 2021). Segments of the population that found remote learning more challenging included rural and urban areas. Rural areas didn’t always have the most reliable internet