

California Pre-Service Teachers Support Systems in and Online Teacher Preparation

Program: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Dissertation-in-Practice Manuscript

by

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Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lack support systems to ensure student success. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. Kolb's experiential learning cycle was the lens that guided the study. The qualitative phenomenological study consisted of two research questions: (a) What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? and (b) What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program? Ten pre-service teachers were interviewed. Thematic analysis was used to unveil six themes. The six themes were a lack of timely communication, lack of specific feedback, mentorship, faculty guidance, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration. Recommendations for practice were to set clear email-free time, adding schedule link to faculty email signatures, and embed the California Teaching Performance Assessment within the teacher preparation program, along with faculty training sessions. Recommendations for future research were to compare faculty email communication versus faculty, adding a schedule link to their email signature. The second recommendation for future research would be to compare two video recording digital tools to provide pre-service teachers' specific feedback.

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Section 1: Foundation

Since COVID-19 hit in 2019, studies have shown that online distance education has become more prevalent, with 56% growth in both asynchronous and synchronous online instruction (Johnson et al., 2022; Korhonen, 2024; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2023). Additionally, by the 2022 academic school year, 4.9 million college students were exclusively enrolled in online distance education classes (Johnson et al., 2022; Korhonen, 2024; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2023). In the 2019–2020 academic school year, 589,693 pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs. A total of 151,138 individuals successfully finished the teaching programs, which encompassed both traditional and alternative approaches (NCES, 2023).

In the 2020–2021 academic school year, 591,353 teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program, and 160,087 completed it (NCES, 2023). As a result, there was a 1% decrease in nationally credentialed teachers (NCES, 2023). Furthermore, in the 2021–2022 academic year, 600,011 pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in teaching preparation programs, and 156,089 completed the program (NCES, 2023; United States Department of Education [USDE], 2022). Therefore, another 1% decrease in nationally credentialed teachers (NCES, 2023; United States Department of Education [USDE], 2022).

Although the statistics show a high attrition rate, Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) based alternative teacher preparation programs, including online distance education, are increasing (Inside Higher Ed, 2023; Johnson et al., 2022; NCES, 2023). These numbers equate to 74% of pre-service teacher candidates who did not complete a traditional or IHE-based alternative teaching preparation program. The increase in online distance education teacher preparation programs merits exploring.

There are seven IHE-based alternative teacher preparation programs in the United States (National Education Association [NEA], 2025). IHE-based alternative teacher preparation programs had 10% more students completing the teacher preparation programs between 2011–2020 and adding to the teacher workforce (King, 2022; NEA, 2025). These online distance teacher education preparation programs attract career-changers and retain unlicensed educators by providing a more affordable, flexible, and fast track to the classroom and adding to the diversification of the teacher workforce (NEA, 2025). Three out of seven state-approved higher education institutions, Alliant International University, National University, and the University of Phoenix, offer alternative teacher preparation programs to provide a pathway to a California teaching credential (NEA, 2025).

The teaching and learning components expected of a pre-service teacher in an online distance teacher education preparation program in California vary within each school (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2024; NEA, 2020). The components are pedagogy courses, student teaching hours, licensure assessment taken before the first day of teaching, licensure assessment taken after the first day of teaching, and the length of the program (Archibald et al., 2020; Barbour & Hodges, 2024; CTC, 2024; NEA, 2025; University of Phoenix, 2025). Table 1 includes the components of online distance education.

Table 1*Components in an Online Distance Teacher Education Preparation Program in California*

University	Pedagogy Course Hours	Student Teaching Hours	Assessments Before First Day of Teaching	Assessments After the First Day of Teaching	Length Of Program
Alliant International University	10 courses	Option 1: Teacher of Record Day 1 Option 2: 16-week student teaching	California Subject Examination for Teachers (CSET) or California Subject Examination for Multiple Subjects (CSET).	Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) Elementary and California Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA)	1 year
National University	120 hours of pre-service coursework (-5 courses)	Teacher of Record Day 1	California Basic Skills for Educators (CBEST) and California Subject Exams for Teachers (CSET)	Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) Elementary and California Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA)	1–2 years
University of Phoenix	10 courses	Student Teaching	California Basic Skills for Educators (CBEST) and California Subject Exams for Teachers (CSET)	Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA) Elementary and California Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA)	1.5 years

(CTC, 2024; NEA, 2025; University of Phoenix, 2025)

California has over 21,000 pre-service teachers leaving the program, with the total number of enrolled pre-service teachers at 34,626 and only 13,149 completing the program (CTC, 2024). These numbers equate to 62% of teacher candidates who did not complete the program (CTC, 2024). The demand for well-trained and highly skilled teachers graduating from online distance education teacher preparation programs is more relevant than ever (Archibald et al., 2020). As the demand for online distance education increases, the ability to provide effective student support systems in an online distance education California teacher preparation program becomes invaluable (Inside Higher Ed, 2023; NCES, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs often lack support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020; Yudit et al., 2023). According to Rasheed and Adbullah (2020), the increase of digital literacy support systems in an online distance education pre-service teacher's preparation program is needed for the completion of the program. Additionally, an increased understanding of digital literacy would allow pre-service teachers to evaluate online tools and apply them to the online learning platform (Rahmi et al., 2024). Furthermore, support systems that provide pre-service teachers opportunities to integrate technology for online learning activities and provide self-regulation tools to meet learning goals would promote pre-service teacher success (Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020).

Although distance education provides students flexibility, cost efficiency, and a variety of learning formats, embedded student support systems to promote student self-regulation skills are imperative for online distance education success (Chang & Lee, 2022). Furthermore, online distance education offers various delivery methods, creating a more personalized learning environment that can lead to high retention rates when appropriate support systems are in place (Chang & Lee, 2022). The embedded student support systems are essential for academic success.

Research findings support the lack of innovative support systems within online distance teacher education platforms (Chang & Lee, 2022; Holyoke et al., 2023). Even though educational institutions are providing support systems for online distance education students, additional changes are required for call center services, tutor support services, tutor-student communication, and funding to meet student needs (Aluko, 2021). Additionally, more qualitative research needs to be conducted on the student's whole learning experience to ensure effective

student support systems are in place (Aluko, 2021). If efforts are not made to increase pre-service teachers' online distance educational support systems, California's teacher preparation programs will continue to have high attrition rates (CTC, 2024; Hachey et al., 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. The sample size was 10 pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program, within the recommended sample size by Creswell (2020) of five to 25 interviews for the phenomenology study. A recruitment flyer was posted on a private social media group page. The inclusion criteria for pre-service teachers consisted of two conditions: Participants must be 18 or older and be enrolled in an online distance education California teacher preparation program. The instrument that was used to collect data was an interview guide. One-on-one recorded interviews were conducted on Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing platform. Thematic analysis was used to identify coding, categories, and emerging themes using NVivo 15. The qualitative phenomenology study provided insight into support systems and what may be needed for pre-service teachers within the online distance education teacher preparation programs.

Research Questions

RQ1

What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?

RQ2

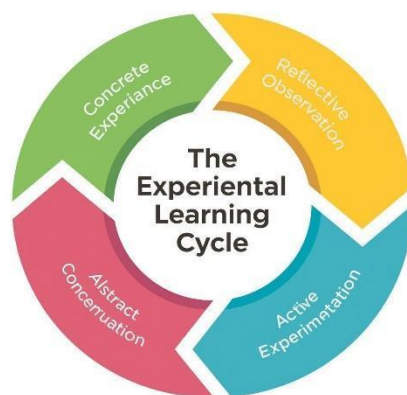
What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of experiential learning founded by theorist David A. Kolb and influenced by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget (Kolb, 2015). The conceptual framework of the experiential learning model (see Figure 1) portrays four learning modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, which are based on life experiences, genetic makeup, and environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, 2015, 2023). Based on the person's learning style, a learner will choose to grasp information by concrete experience; a new experience, reflective observation; think about what they learned, abstract conceptualization; develop theories and concepts, and active experimentation; learner applies knowledge and skills to a new experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2015).

Figure 1

Experiential Learning Cycle



(Canva Pro, 2025)

The experiential learning theory application for the online distance education learner begins with students choosing to feel through a concrete experience or think about an abstract concept to begin the learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, 2015, 2023). This may occur in asynchronous, synchronous, or blended with pre-recorded videos prior to the modules to introduce the student to new concepts. Once the student moves through the concrete experience or abstract conceptualization learning modes, the final stages of the experiential learning theory (ELT) are decided by the student to complete the learning process, which is active experimentation or reflective observation (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, 2015, 2023). For an online distance education learner this may be applied through a signature assignment that connects new knowledge with a real-world problem in a writing assignment. This learning process is repeated as many times as the learner decides to proceed to understand and apply new knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, 2015, 2023).

Harnessing the power of the experiential learning cycle within an online distance education teacher preparation program enhances engagement and efficacy, transforming the educational experience for aspiring educators (Kolb & Kolb, 2013, 2015, 2023). In an online distance education teacher preparation program, utilizing pre-recorded videos and immersive simulations can significantly enhance concrete experience and reflective observation. These dynamic resources engage learners effectively, providing them with rich, practical insights that deepen their understanding and foster professional growth (Cohen, 2021; Janke et al., 2024; Koivisto, 2023; Yorkovsky & Levenberg, 2022). Abstract conceptualization and active experimentation can involve synchronous discussions through breakout rooms and simulations, followed by reflections after each simulated session. (Cohen, 2021; Janke et al., 2024; Koivisto, 2023; Yorkovsky & Levenberg, 2022).

Concrete experiences and reflective observation could be a virtual simulation, break-out groups with a real-life teaching scenario, peer discussions solving a real-world problem, and written reflections (Janke et al., 2024; Koivisto, 2023; Yorkovsky & Levenberg, 2022; Zilka, 2021). Following the experiential cycle, pre-service teachers would transform their knowledge based on their learning style to use active experimentation in the real-world classroom or virtual classroom simulation to apply instructional strategies. The following are definitions of key terms.

Definitions of Key Terms

Seven key terms are listed for this study.

Asynchronous

Asynchronous online learning is when instruction is available for students at a time that works best for them (Johnson et al., 2022).

Blended Learning

Blended learning is a distance education format that combines asynchronous and synchronous learning (Heilporn et al., 2021).

Distance Education

Distance education is the implementation of one or more technology platforms to educate students asynchronously or synchronously (NCES, 2022).

Institution of Higher Education (IHE)

Regionally accredited colleges and universities are approved to offer professional education or subject matter programs by accrediting agencies like the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (CTC, 2024).

Support Systems

Support systems in an online distance environment consist of four principles: (a) integration which is the transforming from a traditional classroom into a virtual classroom; (b) transition from classroom (face-to-face) to virtual is planned (c) process-oriented which is the transition from a single point of support to a support system through the learning process; and (d) personalization which is the transition from a group to individualized support (Li & Cheng, 2023).

Synchronous

Synchronous online learning is when instruction is at a specific time, virtual or in-person (Johnson et al., 2022).

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs are a set of courses and field experiences that comprise pre-service teacher candidate preparation for a preliminary teaching credential by an entity approved by the California Commission to offer educator preparation (CTC, 2024).

Review of Literature

In the 2022–2023 academic school year, 35,061 pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in the California Teaching Preparation program and 12,009 completed the program (CTC, 2023). These numbers equate to 66% of pre-service teacher candidates who did not complete the program. The demand for trained teachers and online distance education teacher preparation programs is more relevant than ever (Archibald et al., 2020). As the number of California credentialed teachers declines, future research into online distance education support systems in teacher preparation programs is needed for pre-service teacher's success. Understanding pre-service teachers' voices would fill research gaps (CTC, 2024; Hill & Smith, 2023).

Therefore, the study to explore California's lived experiences in online distance education teacher preparation programs often lacking support systems to ensure student success is important for pre-service teachers, faculty, and instructional designers. The academic databases accessed were ERIC, Springer Nature Journals, Omni File, and Complementary Index. The search parameters included *pre-service teachers, student teachers, preservice teachers, teacher candidates, attrition, retention, dropout, online learning, distance learning, asynchronous online learning, synchronous online learning, blended online learning, and support services*. The literature review will focus on current findings in teacher preparation programs, distance education, asynchronous online learning, synchronous online learning, blended learning, pre-service teacher attrition, and support systems, books, peer-reviewed journals, articles, and government entities from the last 5 years.

Teacher Preparation Programs

IHEs consist of California State University and University of California schools and private/independent institutions that offer traditional and or alternative, IHE-based programs, and local educational agencies [LEAs] are approved to offer an alternative, not IHE-based program (CTC, 2023). It takes 1–4 years to complete a California teacher preparation program depending on where you are in your educational journey. For example, if you are an undergraduate student, it will take longer than if you hold a bachelor's degree, or have a master's degree (CTC, 2023). For the study, alternative IHE-based programs will be explored since these are considered online distance education programs.

Distance Education. Distance education is the implementation of one or more technology platforms to educate students asynchronously or synchronously (Heilporn et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022; NCES, 2022). There are three types of online distance education that

will be explored in this study; asynchronous, synchronous, and blended learning environments. The three state-approved higher education institutions; Alliant University, National University, and the University of Phoenix offer online blended alternative teacher preparation programs, to provide a pathway to a California teaching credential (NEA, 2025).

Asynchronous Online Learning. Asynchronous online learning is when instruction is available for students at a time that works best for them (Johnson et al., 2022). Students in higher education distinctly prefer asynchronous learning because of the ability to learn anytime and anywhere providing flexibility and freedom (Endris & Molla, 2023; Kosar, 2021). Asynchronous online learning provides various technological mediums to meet diverse student's learning needs and is considered distance education (Distance Education and Training, 2023; Higher Education Act, Section 103, 1965; Johnson et al., 2022; NCES, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

A qualitative study surveying asynchronous online learning in pre-service English teachers' found that first and second-year pre-service English teachers like the flexibility to watch pre-recorded videos due to life situations (Kosar, 2021). Third-year pre-service English teachers felt more motivated to learn because of the flexibility to replay videos within their timeframe (Kosar, 2021). Additionally, pre-service math and science teachers understood concepts better because they could replay the recordings and films (Yorkovsky & Levenberg, 2022). Along with providing flexibility and freedom, asynchronous distance learning provides pre-recorded videos for learners to review at their convenience and an opportunity to collaborate with peers in online forums.

Pre-service teachers found collaborating in online forums helpful in discussing teaching practicum, reflection, and building an online community (Eisenback, 2021; Zilka, 2021).

Researcher findings showed that providing a space for student-instructor reflection and feedback built a stronger online community (Eisenback, 2021). For example, pre-service teachers used Flipgrid to provide an online technology piece for student and instructor reflection during an eighth-grade ELA class and allowed pre-service teachers to provide instant positive affirmations and direct feedback aligned with the content (Eisenback, 2021).

Another example of engaging and meaningful learning activities in an asynchronous learning environment is implementing syllabus digital escape, critical debates, role play, mind mapping, infographics, voice threads, and collaborative Google slides (Kerrigan & Aghekyan, 2022). For example, creating a learning activity similar to escape rooms so students will understand the syllabus (Keerigan & Aghekyan, 2022). Another way to engage in higher-order thinking skills is to create a critical debate from discussion board prompts that are meaningful and link to real-world applications (Keerigan & Aghekyan, 2022). Pre-service teachers could apply their knowledge of content, reflect, and build an online community based on their asynchronous experience.

According to Karal and Ozdemir Sarialioglu (2022), 72.7% of students supported peer feedback, and 21.2% of students stated that the peer feedback did not help support the assignment. Additionally, 96.9% of students found instructor feedback helpful in providing support for their assignments (Karal & Ozdemir Sarialioglu, 2022). The lack of interaction between peer-to-peer, student-faculty, group projects, and building community leads to students feeling isolated in an asynchronous online learning environment.

One factor in feeling less isolated was interacting with faculty during the week and having them provide immediate feedback on students' learning outcomes to confirm that the students understood the materials (Tuckel & Pok-Carabalona, 2023). Additionally, students

wanted faculty to be available for more questions and guided discussions (Tuckel & Pok-Carabalona, 2023; West et al., 2023). However, some pre-service English teachers found that asynchronous online learning did not allow space to ask questions to the instructor to provide feedback, and procrastination led to not watching the pre-recorded videos and poor time management (Hill, 2021; Karal & Ozdemir Sarialioglu, 2022; Kosar, 2021; Zilka, 2021). Faculty interaction and feedback are necessary for students' understanding of the material.

Synchronous Online Learning. Synchronous online learning is considered distance education and is delivered through the Internet with students participating remotely at the same time while instructors are providing feedback and direct instruction (Distance Education and Training, 2023; Higher Education Act, Section 103 (1965); Johnson et al., 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Over recent years, synchronous learning has become more frequently used on platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets, WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and YouTube Videos to continue educating at post-secondary institutions (Bhutkar et al., 2023; Moorhouse, 2023). Faculty teaching distance education online were more advanced in digital tools, and engagement was high (Muir et al., 2022). However, the pandemic of 2000 forced educators to the online synchronous format and students were frustrated with the lack of technological skills of faculty. The three themes of synchronous online learning are simulation-based learning, interaction with peers and faculty, and immediate feedback.

Simulation-Based Learning (SBL). Simulation-based learning (SBL) is an experiential learning environment that has been used in many different fields to practice and reflect on theory in a safe learning environment but is slow to implement within the teacher preparation programs (Ledger et al., 2024; Maxwell, 2022; Meyer et al., 2023; Subramaniam, 2023). Both medical and aeronautical disciplines have implemented simulation-based learning to alleviate the cost and

provide an environment to build the skills needed before practicing on patients or flying an expensive aircraft (Meyer et al., 2023; Subramaniam, 2023). Providing a safe experiential learning environment to practice and reflect on theory is promising.

In the medical field psychiatry students successfully used synchronous tele-simulation for their clerkship (Meyer et al., 2023). The synchronous online learning experience allowed students to practice clinical skills on a simulated patient (Meyer et al., 2023). In this experiential learning environment psychiatry students practiced pre-brief, one-on-one feedback, observation of other students, and the debrief (Meyer et al., 2023). Furthermore, faculty-integrated experiential learning using simulation sessions, service learning, project-based learning, and community service to provide real-world experience (Maxwell, 2022). Although slow to be integrated within a teaching program, simulated-based learning is successful.

Sim School and Second Life are two globally used simulated-based learning environments for pre-service teachers (Ledger et al., 2024). Both virtual platforms provide pre-service teachers a safe space to practice and reflect on pedagogy (Ledger et al., 2024). Furthermore, these virtual platforms can build professional confidence, teach time and classroom management, provide pre-service teachers with student files to understand learning styles, and abilities, and adapt teaching strategies and classroom management (Ledger et al., 2024). There are many benefits of simulated-based learning environments for pre-service teachers.

Pre-service teachers participating in synchronous online preparation programs experience the benefits of understanding theory and skills through teaching activities, student teaching, and internships (Abdullatit & Al-Omair, 2024; Nikoceviq-Kurti, 2023; Xie et al., 2021). The participants stated that the benefits were an increased level of flexibility, cost efficiency, critical research skills, and self-discipline (Abdullatif and Al-Omair, 2024; Xie et al., 2021). The added

integration of a simulated-based learning environment within the teaching program provides theory, teaching skills, and reflection of practice that can be practiced before entering a real-world classroom setting.

Interaction Between Peers and Faculty. Increased engagement and positive interactions between instructor-student and student-student are two advantages of an online synchronous learning environment (Bhutkar et al., 2023; Lotfizadeh & Acosta, 2022; Mallon et al., 2023). Instructors who ask questions during synchronous online learning increased engagement with students providing a higher level of understanding (Bhutkar et al., 2023). Additionally, instructors who posted pre-recorded announcements, emails, and reminders that connected students to instructors and content in a positive way encouraged student engagement and interaction (Muir et al., 2022). Another way that has been found to encourage interaction and engagement with students has been the addition of polls, games, and guest speakers in the field of study to engage students (Little, 2022). Even though students were not inclined to turn on their cameras there was interaction between instructor and students through chat (Lotfizadeh & Acosta, 2022). Furthermore, increasing opportunities for student-instructors to engage in a synchronous online learning environment improved retention and engagement (Muir et al., 2022). The ability to make peer-to-peer and peer-instructor connections by building an online synchronous community begins with break-out groups.

Researchers found that structured synchronous break-out groups provided engaging and collaborative learning by building student confidence through peer-to-peer and peer-instructor interactions (Saltz & Heckman, 2020; West et al., 2023). The structured pair activity assigned two roles within the synchronous online break-out group the driver and the observer (Saltz & Heckman, 2020). The driver was assigned the duty of typing and sharing the screen to be

presented with the guidance of the observer who was in charge of evaluating the work by making sure to simplify (Saltz & Heckman). The structured pair activity improved peer-to-peer interaction and increased task production, and teams wanted to work together again (Saltz & Heckman, 2020). Structured synchronous break-out groups provided increased collaborative peer engagement and immediate feedback.

Immediate Feedback. Immediate feedback from instructors and peers is a crucial part of synchronous online learning (Mohamed et al., 2023; West et al., 2023). Researchers found that 44% of students preferred synchronous online learning because of the ability to share work and receive immediate feedback from instructors and peers (West et al., 2023). Pre-service teachers revised their practice planning, implementing, evaluating, and reflecting on their lesson plans with immediate feedback (Xie et al., 2021). Although peer feedback was meaningful in a synchronous online learning environment, future research is needed to model instructional strategies for students to provide quality feedback to peers (Karal & Ozemir Sarialioglu, 2022). Quality feedback to peers is a skill that must be modeled using digital tools to provide a structured way to give peers feedback.

The lack of faculty technological skills in advanced Zoom skills and overall digital skills creates unsatisfied students (Mohamed et al., 2023; Muir et al., 2022; Little, 2022). The faculty's digital incompetence led instructors to fall back on instructional strategies used for face-to-face classroom learning and direct instruction (Bergdah, 2022; Donlon et al., 2022). Student frustration and digitally inept instructors created a restrictive and less motivating synchronous online learning environment (Mohamed et al., 2023). Pre-service math teachers found that their cognitive skills increased, but their social engagement decreased in an online learning

environment (Muir et al., 2022). The synchronous online learning instructors who lacked digital skills reverted to direct instruction.

Although direct instruction is effective in the brick-and-mortar classroom, when used, in the online environment, there is less engagement with students (Donlon et al., 2022; Little, 2022; Muir et al., 2022). Researchers found that if direct instruction is used in the online environment must be less than 30 minutes (Donlon et al., 2022). Pre-service teachers found that online lectures gave them “zoom fatigue” and it was difficult to self-regulate (Zilka, 2021). Additionally, instructors relied on transferring the classroom syllabus and teaching strategies to the synchronous online learning environment which was less effective (Muir et al., 2022).

Finally, distractions are a challenge in the synchronous online learning environment and further research needs to be done to investigate the distractions (Cheung et al., 2023; Little, 2022). Researchers found that environmental distractions like family members and pets would interfere with the live session, leaving students less likely to turn on cameras and become less engaged during the session (Lotfizadeh & Acosta, 2022). As distractions frustrate synchronous students, blending asynchronous and synchronous online learning for pre-service teachers is another option in online distance education.

Blended Online Learning. The blended online learning environment is a distance education format that combines asynchronous and synchronous learning influences academic outcomes, and positive student perceptions regarding learning, and is equitable for all learners (Abdurahman & Yohannes, 2023; Cachero-Paderog, 2023; Heilporn et al., 2021; Mendoza & Venables, 2023). Researchers suggest an equal split between asynchronous and synchronous online learning for conceptual courses and adding more synchronous sessions for quantitative

courses (West et al., 2023; Wu & You, 2022). The three types of blended learning are artificial intelligence (AI), simulation, and problem-based learning.

Artificial Intelligence (AI). Artificial intelligence (AI) is one of the technological tools provided in a blended online learning environment (Lee et al., 2024; Jo, 2024; Su & Sazalli, 2024; Chang & Lee, 2022). Taiwanese undergraduate students used Open AI GPT to regulate learning and promote higher order thinking skills in an undergraduate chemistry course. The findings suggested that using an AI GPT that is guidance-based versus a traditional AI providing answers was positive on students' problem-solving skills. The guidance-based Open AI GPT provided hints to foster higher-order thinking. and based on the questions were able to learn from past interactions and refine responses (Lee et al., 2024). Although the traditional Meta Tutor AI was found to motivate Australian biology and math students to understand the value of the courses, Open AI ChatGPT was able to learn from past interactions and refine responses (Chang & Lee; Lee et al., 2024). Additionally, Chinese college students found that WE Chat improved English language skills by providing active use of spoken English in the blended learning classroom (Su & Sazalli, 2024). Open AI GPT in a blended learning environment provided students with interactive experiences that promoted higher order thinking skills.

Simulation Software. Another interactive experience applied in a blended learning environment is the value of simulation software, which provides motivation and a platform for applying knowledge in an interactive experience (Janke et al., 2024; Koivisto, 2023). Simulation learning activities at Embry-Riddle ERAU-WV provided future pilots with interactive and hands-on training, reducing the cost (Janke et al., 2024). Additionally, researchers' quasi-experimental design showed that surgical nursing theoretical knowledge through simulation software depicting practical patient scenarios was effective (Koivisto, 2023).

Problem-Based Learning. A third interactive application in the blended learning environment is linking skills to practice using problem-based learning (Hambrock & De Villiers, 2023; Chang & Lee 2022). Integrating breakout groups within a synchronous Zoom session encourages collaborative learning and promotes online social groups (Chang & Lee 2022; Rasheed et al., 2020). Adding to the importance students will be prepared for the future by learning from experience (Hambrock & De Villiers, 2023). Although problem-based learning is an advantage in a blended learning environment there are challenges. The challenges of a blended learning environment are self-regulation, immediate feedback, and a lack of technology training for instructors.

Self-regulation without intervention is a challenge in the blended learning environment (Yudt et al., 2023; Chang & Lee, 2022; Laura, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020). Researchers found that students in a blended STEM learning course improved their self-regulation with game-based learning and Meta Tutor AI, which provided immediate feedback that promoted self-regulation (Chang & Lee, 2022). Furthermore, the time-efficient feedback provided the intervention to self-regulate (Laura, 2021). Although embedding self-regulation technologies in a blended online learning environment supports students' self-regulation, the lack of immediate feedback from an instructor adds to these challenges.

Immediate feedback in a blended learning environment is a challenge for the instructor using a variety of technological platforms (Hasnain, 2022; Laura, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020). Integration of technology such as social media sites into the learning management system allows peer-to-peer and student-faculty communication (Rasheed et al., 2020; Hasnain, 2022). There is a gap between the actual technology being used within the blended learning environment (Hasnain, 2022). So, future research suggests that instructors become part of the discussion.

Finally, the lack of training in technology for instructors in a blended online learning environment is a disadvantage (Higgins et al., 2024; McManus et al., 2024; Hambrock & De Villiers, 2023; Hasnain, 2022). Irish university faculty expressed a strong preference for blended learning; however, they suggested professional development focus on integrating online learning technologies, stating that it's not a one-size-fits-all approach to online learning (McManus et al., 2024). Additionally, United Kingdom faculty voiced concerns about technological barriers, making them feel unprepared, uncertain, and unsure about online teaching (Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, the digital literacy deficiency provided a hindrance to a successful implementation to the course (Hambrock & De Villiers, 2023). The need to increase digital literacy is important for a blended pre-service teacher preparation program.

A blended online learning environment in a pre-service teacher's preparation program is relevant for a balance between the two distance education options (synchronous and asynchronous), beneficial to learning, academic achievement, and a positive student outcome (Amirora, 2023; Archibald et al., 2020; Rida et al., 2021; Watanapokakul, 2022; Yudt, 2023). A combination of the benefits of synchronous online learning factors simulation and IvR adoption, positive interactions with peers and instructors, and immediate feedback (Bhutkar et al., 2023; Mohamed et al., 2023; Rodriguez, 2024; Subramanian, 2023). The benefits of asynchronous online learning self-study, increased comprehension, and flexibility (Anar & Nur, 2023; West et al., 2023) provide the best of both platforms. As seen in an English as a foreign language class, students experienced improvements in speaking English, were cost-effective, and eliminated travel time to a brick-and-mortar campus (Watanapokakul, 2022). Although blending the best benefits of synchronous and asynchronous online learning, there are challenges in the blended online learning environment.

The challenges of a blended online environment in a pre-service teacher's preparation program are a lack of digital literacy for students and instructors, student self-regulation, and student and instructor interactions (Yudt et al., 2023; Laura, 2021). The blended learning environment becomes an effective and viable way for pre-service teachers in a teacher preparation program to learn and apply the most effective digital technologies to engage in student-instructor interaction and embed student self-regulation technologies (Laura, 2021). These digital tools would integrate mobile-friendly and provide timely student-instructor feedback for diverse learners (Laura, 2021). The attitudes, skills, and knowledge of pre-service teachers' 21st-century digital skills are important to explore in future research to employ the most effective instructional strategies and community-building technologies to enhance learning (Laura, 2021; Yudet et al., 2023). The future of distance education is the ability to provide the benefits of both synchronous and asynchronous online learning in a balanced, blended online learning environment.

Pre-Service Teacher Attrition

The District of Columbia plus 47 states had an estimated 314,134 positions either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments, representing about 1 in 10 of all teaching positions nationally (Franco & Patrick, 2023). According to the Title II California Report (2023), 34,876 pre-service teachers enrolled in a teaching program, and 13,278 completed the program. In other words, 62% of California's pre-service teachers did not complete the teaching program United States Department of Education [USDE], 2023). The CTC (2024) requires 600 clinical hours, which may be acquired by guided and supervised teaching including whole class instruction, small groups, and other direct contact with students, including final student teaching, co-planning time, with veteran practitioners for lessons that the candidate will

deliver, working with veteran practitioners, grading, and analyzing student work, reflecting on lessons, and planning for the needs of individual students, time working with professional learning communities, grade level, and department meetings. (p. 4) As California pre-service teachers' enrollment decreases, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study is to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. By learning about pre-service teachers' lived experiences, insight may be gained on how support systems can be improved.

Support Systems

As 62% of California pre-service teachers do not complete the teacher preparation programs, the need to implement an effective multi-tiered support system within the online distance education teacher preparation programs is urgently needed to prevent pre-service teacher dropout and student success (Aluko, 2021; CTC, 2024; Holyoke et al., 2023; Sallese et al., 2023). Holyoke et al. (2023) stated that a direct system of support provided pre-service teachers as active participants. For example, pre-service teachers were actively participating when they were planning for instruction, teaching, and reflecting on their practice (Holyoke et al., 2023). Additionally, the added support from teacher educators, field supervisors, and peers within method classes allowed pre-service teachers the opportunity to make changes and improve their practice (Holyoke et al., 2023). Along with effective support systems during practicum, pre-service teachers need self-regulated learning and digital literacy skills to navigate the online distance learning environment.

The knowledge and application of self-regulation and digital literacy skills are critical for pre-service teachers to access student support systems in an online distance education

comprehensive teacher preparation program (Chang & Lee, 2022; Hefer Bembenutty, 2023). The skill of self-regulation is important for pre-service teachers to practice during the teaching preparation program instead of after completion of the teaching preparation program (Hefer Bembenutty, 2023). The classroom teacher must model self-regulation to enable students to set goals, seek help, and better learning practices and show digital literacy (Hefer Bembenutty, 2023; Huda, 2022). Furthermore, pre-service teachers in an online blended-learning teacher preparation program felt that although their program provided support systems, areas were lacking such as call centers, tutoring services, and funding (Aluko, 2021). These support services are essential in a distance education program where students are not on campus and need quick information with busy schedules.

According to Holyoke et al. (2023), pre-service teachers feel supported when collaborating with peers by reflecting on instructional strategies and student learning activities. Additionally, when teacher candidates participate in field observations and student teaching practicums, they feel supported by their mentors and faculty supervisors (Holyoke et al., 2023). However, in some experiences, due to the classroom environment and being pulled in multiple directions, teacher candidates did not feel they were receiving equal time when they had to share a mentor (Holyoke et al., 2023). As some teacher candidates experience their first classroom experience during the practicum, there are social-emotional challenges that are often overlooked.

A south-central United States university conducted a study implementing a prevention-focused support system for pre-service teacher candidates (Sallese et al., 2023). The three-tiered support system focused on pre-screening potential teaching candidates, individualized interventions, and monitoring progress within the cohort to support pre-service teachers' success in obtaining special education, general education, or English as a second language certification

(Sallese et al., 2023). The assessment of teacher candidates' foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions in the university and field-based settings is important for teacher success.

Teacher candidates' foundational knowledge, skills, and disposition matrix were assessed with specific guidelines based on state certification requirements, field supervisors, or faculty members (Sallese et al., 2023). For example, teaching candidates had to maintain a 2.75 (GPA) to sit for the state examination, which covered foundational knowledge (Sallese et al., 2023). Faculty-created rubrics were designed to assess teacher candidates' skills (Sallese et al., 2023). Additionally, an online disposition matrix was given at the end of every semester by the field supervisor or faculty member by rating the pre-service teacher on a scale of 1–5. The scale is 1 (rarely) and 5 (almost always displays) (Sallese et al., 2023). The disposition matrices were conducted in both the university and field-based settings to understand candidates' applicable abilities for the classroom environment.

Researchers constructed two disposition matrices for both the university and field-based environment to include self-regulation, preparedness, professionalism, emotional, social, and cultural intelligence, and determination to complete the teaching program (Sallese et al., 2023). After 4 years in practice, the increase in teacher graduation from the teaching program, as well as teacher employment, was a success (Sallese et al., 2023). The ethical considerations addressed in this study include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the National University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. Participants and the research process were protected by the guidance of the three principles stated in the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education,

and Welfare [DHEW], 1979). The Belmont Report's three ethical principles, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, were put in place throughout the research process (DHEW, 1979).

Respect for Persons

Respect for persons is valuing opinions and judgements along with actions of the self-governing individual (DHEW, 1979). One way to ensure respect for persons is providing reasonable information regarding the study and reiterating voluntary participation (DHEW, 1979). In this study, providing reasonable information of the study will be ensured by posting a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) on a private (Facebook) group. The private Facebook group assists pre-service teachers to pass the California Teaching Performance Assessment (CalTPA). Prior to posting a recruitment flyer, permission will be requested from the administrator of a private Facebook group. Additionally, participants may withdraw at any point or opt out of specific questions if they feel uncomfortable.

Beneficence. Beneficence implores two rules: (a) do not harm and (b) maximize benefits and minimize harm (DHEW, 1979). In this study, no harm and maximizing benefits and minimizing rules will be ensured by using a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) posted on the private (Facebook) group and when eligibility requirements are met, a written consent form (Appendix B) will be emailed to the participant. The consent form will state the procedures used to provide privacy and confidentiality during the study. Additionally, securing participants' identity by using anonymous referencing and storing in a secure cloud storage. This will ensure their beneficence.

Justice. Justice is treating a person fairly (DHEW, 1979). In this study open communication will ensure justice to participants. For example, during one-on-one recorded interviews, participants will be treated fairly by open communication by sharing the types of

research questions that will be asked to ensure transparency. Additionally, opportunities for participants to make informed decisions by reviewing transcripts and accurately reporting results.

Summary

The United States is in a teacher crisis with 31% of teachers leaving the public schools and 49% of teachers leaving the private school sector (NCES, 2024). Along with nationally high percentages of teachers leaving the profession, 9% of teachers with 3 years or less of teaching leave the public school, and 10% of teachers with 3 years or less of teaching leave the private school system (NCES, 2024). As states brace themselves for the teacher shortage, school districts are hiring 163,000 unqualified teachers to fill the classrooms (USBLS, 2023). Additionally, teaching positions with the most vacancies are general elementary and special education (Delarosa, 2023). The top four states with teacher shortages are Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and California (Ward, 2024).

California ranks fourth in teacher shortages as 10,000 teacher vacancies were reported during the 2021–2022 school year and a 16% decrease in teacher credentials (Governing, 2025). Additionally, in the 2017–2018 to 2021–2022 academic school year, the number of California credentialed teachers declined: Multiple Subject Credentials -33.1%, Single Subject Credentials -14.7%, Educational Specialist Credentials - 20.2% (CTC, 2024). The California decrease in teacher credentials and teacher shortage creates a problem for the students, parents, and university stakeholders.

The problem addressed in this study was online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lack support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020; Yudt et al., 2023). The significance of the problem was that California's teacher distance education online preparation programs have had high attrition rates

(CTC, 2024; Hachey et al., 2023). The 2020–2021 to 2021–2022 academic school year saw a 2% decrease in nationally credentialed teachers (NCES, 2023; United States Department of Education [USDE], 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. Therefore, the anticipated outcomes of this study are to explore the support systems by addressing the research questions, “What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?” and “What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?”

The population of the study sought to include pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program. The target population was participants 18 years or older and pre-service teachers enrolled in an online teacher preparation program. The proposed sample consisted of 10–15 pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program. Those who met the criteria became participants. The data was collected through 1-1 recorded one-hour interviews through Zoom. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis by coding, categorizing, and finding themes through NVivo 15 to address the problem, purpose, and research questions. The findings from this study will contribute to scholarly literature and provide insight into student support systems for pre-service teachers, faculty, and instructional designers. The research method and design will be presented in the next section.

Section 2: Methodology and Design

The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lack support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Abdullah, 2020; Yudit et al., 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. This section will describe and justify the research design and method, population and sample, material, data collection, data analysis, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. This potential impact of the study on online distance education in California pre-service teacher preparation programs offered insights for improved support systems to ensure student success.

Design and Method

A qualitative methodology guided exploration of pre-service teachers' lived experiences in California's online distance education teacher preparation program lacks support systems to ensure student success. The qualitative methodological approach used words instead of numbers to understand the meaning of a phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The qualitative methodology guided an exploration of a phenomenon, which is pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education teacher preparation program in California (Edmond & Kennedy, 2017). Exploring the "how and why" is the method of understanding and finding meaning with a qualitative method (Edmond & Kennedy, 2017). The rationale for using the qualitative methodology was to answer research questions that focused on how pre-service teachers' lived experiences in California's online distance education teacher preparation program

lack support systems to ensure student success. Additionally, 1-1 interviews were conducted to capture words to answer the research questions.

Quantitative methodology begins with a thesis statement (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The thesis statement fuels the research by following the scientific methods to prove or reject the thesis statement (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Additionally, the quantitative method uses variables to determine relationships or effects (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The quantitative method was determined not to fit the constructs of the research questions because a scientific method and numbers will not effectively reflect the lived experiences.

The mixed-methods approach includes a mix of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). However, in this method, the quantitative process is considered the primary process, with the qualitative method secondary (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). In other words, the thesis statement, scientific process, and variables align with the research questions (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The qualitative method adds to the findings of quantitative research (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Due to the nature of the mixed-methods approach, using qualitative methods as a secondary approach, the mixed-methods approach was not chosen to be the approach that would offer an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, the qualitative method was chosen.

A phenomenological design was utilized to guide the exploration of the lived experiences of pre-service teachers in an online distance education teacher preparation program in California, which often lacks adequate support systems to ensure student success. The phenomenological design focused on human experience (Armstrong, 2005). The phenomenological design aligned with the purpose statement, which is to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support

systems to ensure student success. Furthermore, Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenological design, looks at how people see and understand their world (Armstrong, 2005).

The goal of phenomenology is to uncover the essential nature of experiences by studying them from a personal viewpoint (Armstrong, 2005). The design is used to examine thoughts, intentions, and the meanings that people assign to their experiences (Armstrong, 2005). This makes phenomenology a unique way to understand human life. The rationale for using qualitative phenomenology design is to understand human experiences, including their thoughts and lives, within the California online distance education pre-service teacher preparation program.

Due to the popularity of phenomenological research, oftentimes researchers tend to generalize the participants' personal experiences; therefore, there have been some concerns about the analysis of the data by the researcher being both “tainted and far removed from the lived experiences of the participant” (Stoltz, 2023, p. 831). Although bias is a part of phenomenological design, it is important to use self-reflection by journaling ideas to prevent bias when interpreting written data. I will use self-reflection by journaling ideas before and after interviewing participants to avoid bias. While the phenomenology design was determined to be the most effective design for the study, other qualitative designs were considered but determined to be less effective. Time was a factor that was considered when choosing a design. Additionally, obtaining rich, lived experiences in a written context was the determining factor.

Ethnography designs rely on the researcher to immerse themselves in a culture over a period to observe, conduct interviews, and watch behaviors (Frankfort-Nachmias et al., 2025). Immersing myself in the online distance education California teacher preparation program is not

possible because the culture of the online program is not in person and participants may be located anywhere in California. Additionally, ethnography design would take more time to foster online distance education relationships, and time is a factor.

The case study was another qualitative design that was considered but proved to be less effective. The research questions must be “how” or “why” when choosing a case study design (Yin, 2018). Additionally, there would be no control over behavioral events, one or multiple cases may be used, and the phenomenon is current and not historical (Yin, 2018). Although the case study design aligns with the study of human experiences, the design was not chosen. The limitations of this design were that the research questions for the study were “what” and did not follow the case study process. Therefore, the case study was not chosen for the study.

Less effective for this study is the grounded theory design. In the grounded theory design, the researcher aims to develop and refine theories based on data collected from multiple instruments (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The variety of materials that may be obtained includes observations, interviews, videos, recordings, journals, and memoirs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As the name suggests, a theory is created based on data collection. Since the focus of the study is not to create a theory about online distance education, California pre-service teacher preparation programs lack of support systems to ensure student success. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological study will be utilized.

Population and Sample

The setting of the study was an online distance teacher preparation program environment. Online distance education teacher preparation programs must be accredited by the California Commission (CTC, 2024). Furthermore, the online distance education teacher preparation

programs application guidelines generally require an undergraduate degree (CTC, 2024). The online distance education organization was created for working adult learners.

At the time of the study, the target total population size of pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program was approximately 6,561 students (USDE, 2022). The alternative IHE-based teacher preparation programs attracted students who already hold a bachelor's degree, prior work experience, and are seeking a new career path (USDE, 2024) The adult learners were of particular interest in this study because of their unique life situation. Pre-service teachers often had full-time jobs and family obligations while working towards a California teaching credential.

The sampling approach was purposive. The sampling approach was based on specific criteria that represented the studied population (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The eligibility criteria were that the participant must be enrolled in an online distance education program in a California teacher education program and be 18 years or older. The rationale for using purposive sampling was that it is a popular approach for qualitative research (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).

There are varied perspectives on sample size for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell, 2010; Lodico et al., 2010). According to Creswell (2010), the sample size in a qualitative research study may be between three and 12 participants. For this study, thematic analysis was used, and therefore, the sample size should be sufficient. I hope to include 12 participants.

A recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) was posted on the private social media Facebook group to recruit participants. The private social media Facebook group consisted of pre-service teachers enrolled in online distance education teacher preparation programs who were trying to pass the CalTPA. Permission was obtained from the administrator of the group. The recruitment

flyer introduced me, explained my research study, included inclusive criteria, shared the activities that would be required for the study, and included a few sample interview questions. Additionally, my contact information was provided for members of the private social media group to express their interest or ask questions. After interested participants were screened for eligibility, a consent form (see Appendix B) was emailed to prospective participants. After the consent form was filled out and returned, participants scheduled an interview.

Materials

An interview guide was the data collection source for this study (see Appendix C). The interview guide consisted of 12 open-ended questions. The questions focused on pre-service teachers' lived experiences of online distance education support systems that were lacking and experiences of when support systems were successful. The interview guide consisted of three sections. The first section was demographic information. The second section was aligned with the first research question: What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? The third section was aligned with the second research question: What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

According to Creswell (2020), content credibility and validity are defined when the instrument that measures reflects the appropriate questions that need to be asked for the research study. I consulted a panel of experts to provide feedback on the validity. The committee reviewed and provided feedback. The panel of experts consisted of the dissertation chair, the subject matter expert, and the editor. The feedback provided by the committee encouraged revisions, expansion of ideas, and linking my rationale to the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Before beginning the study, National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained. After the IRB approved the application, recruitment began. A private social media Facebook group was used for recruitment with administrator approval. A recruitment flyer was posted on a private social media site to recruit participants with specific criteria. The inclusion criteria were that participants must be 18 years or older and must be enrolled in an online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation program.

Once potential participants expressed interest in the study, they were asked screening questions to determine if eligible. Participants were determined to be eligible and agreed to participate once the eligibility criteria questions had been asked and answered. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, a consent form was emailed. The consent form was completed and returned before the participant participated in the study. After the consent form was completed and returned, participants scheduled a 1-hour, 1-1 interview.

The data collection source was an interview guide. The data collection began with the researcher assuming the role of interviewer. The same interview guide was used for each participant. The guide contained specific open-ended questions to help guide the collection of data. Throughout the data collection, collaboration with the participant occurred to make sure lived experiences are accurate. Interviews focused on capturing pre-service teachers' lived experiences. The interviews were in a semi-structured format to ensure understanding of the participant's experience, and clarification of answers may be requested.

Zoom session interviews were recorded using the cloud-based record button. The recording was labeled Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3 and stored in a secure password-protected location. The labeling was consistent with the number of participants who

were eligible for the study. Additionally, Zoom's built-in Smart AI Assistant transcription feature was used to transcribe the conversation and was reviewed when reviewing transcripts for accuracy. The transcripts were stored in the same password-protected secure location.

After the interviews, transcripts were returned to the participants for validation. The validation technique is called member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is a technique that is a way for participants to revise their statements. Additionally, member checking ensured the results are credible (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking was through email for participants to review their transcripts for 10–15 minutes to make any changes. This member checking activity was used in the analysis step.

Braun and Clarke's (2021) well-structured six-step thematic analysis process was used to analyze the qualitative data. The six-step thematic analysis process was familiarization with qualitative data, generation of codes, combining codes into themes, reviewing themes, determining the significance of themes, and reporting of findings. A qualitative software program, NVivo 15, was used to organize data and guide the six-step thematic analysis. The importance of familiarization with data was essential to move through the six-step process.

The first step in Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis process was familiarization with the qualitative data. The familiarization process was considered brainstorming. The main goal of reading and making notes on the transcripts was to gather initial observations. Then, each transcript from the recorded interviews was read several times, noting key ideas and first impressions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts were read several times to gather initial ideas.

The next step in the analysis process was coding. The data was analyzed by coding ideas within the transcripts line by line. Coding line by line was completed several times to create coding data. The coding goal was to find keywords and phrases that were related to research

questions. The keywords and phrases were the smaller parts that became several themes. Key words and phrases were identified and coded that were directly linked to the research questions.

The third step of Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis was combining codes into themes. The initial codes were organized by identifying relationships. These relationships were grouped into major categories that reflected broader themes. For example, broader themes may be asynchronous support systems, synchronous support systems, or blended support systems. These categories were refined further into a thematic framework, which supported a clear idea connecting the key categories. Codes were combined into themes that directly answered the research questions.

As the story unfolded, the themes were reviewed and modified when appropriate to align with the research questions. This phase required critical thinking skills. It was essential to check that the data supported the themes and to combine overlaps and subthemes. The data were simplified into main themes.

The fifth step was determining the significance of the themes. After careful review and modification, the themes were narrowed down to primary themes. There is no specific number of themes (Byrne, 2022). The discovery of the primary themes was by answering research questions. The themes were the findings for the reporting phase.

The final step in the analysis process was the reporting of findings. The primary themes were the research findings that were included in the written report. The written report provided evidence from the participants supporting the themes that emerged. The final stage of analysis was the written documentation of the findings.

Personal bias was checked throughout the data collection process. To avoid bias, reflection on personal experiences regarding prejudice, assumptions, and viewpoints of the

phenomena was crucial when collecting and analyzing written data. Throughout the data collection process, journaling was a way to reflect on personal bias, experiences, assumptions, and viewpoints. Journaling was done before and after each interview to prevent bias in the data collection process.

Assumptions

One assumption was the phenomenological study was that pre-service teachers would be honest with the lived experiences they shared. Multiple realities were present from both the researcher and the participant. The philosophical assumption of ontological was the nature of reality and characteristics (Creswell & Baes, 2020). The paradigm that created the participant's reality and perspective needed to be viewed with written words and themes.

Limitations

A limitation of sampling bias may occur in purposive sampling. Purposive sampling participants with specific criteria was used instead of randomly chosen participants for a broader participant pool. The inclusive criteria ensured the credibility of the sample, and rigorous evaluation of data was considered through member checking by returning findings to participants to review for accuracy, reflectivity by reflecting on researchers' bias and objectivity ensured clarity, and confirmability by detailed gathering methods.

Another limitation was the generalization of the study. The study explored one of the three states that faces high teacher shortages. The time and money involved to research all three states was not feasible. However, the findings for one state provided findings to continue the study in another state.

Delimitations

The proposed study focused on pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education teacher preparation program in California. Confining the study to this state allowed exploration of the online distance learning challenges in a teacher preparation program, which often lacks support systems. The findings of this qualitative study are applicable to California teacher preparation programs with similar demographics and settings as this study.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. The intentional criteria in purposive sampling were pre-service teachers enrolled in a California online distance teacher education program. The sample size intended was 10 participants. The sample and size ensured rich data to provide a broader scope of lived experiences to ensure rich data collection.

The method of data collection was an interview guide. The interview guide was used in a recorded interview to obtain the pre-service teacher's lived experiences in text. Additionally, the purpose of the interview guide was to provide in-depth data. The data was analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis using a qualitative software program. NVivo 15 a qualitative software program, was used to analyze the interview transcripts. Initially, the text was coded by highlighting pre-service teachers' lived experiences regarding support systems into categories. The categories were further analyzed, narrowing them down into themes.

The findings offered practical applications to support department heads, instructional designers, and student affairs professionals who are leaders in the California online distance

teacher preparation programs. The specific findings may engage leaders in reviewing their current support system within the online distance teacher education preparation program. Additionally, findings may challenge university leaders to collaborate with department heads from multiple online distance education teacher preparation programs to align the support system. Finally, the findings will open a conversation for department heads, instructional designers, and student affairs professionals to possibly improve support systems in the online distance education teacher preparation programs in California. Results of the study, as well as implications and recommendations, will be presented in the next chapter.

Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacked support systems to ensure student success. The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lacked support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020; Yudt et al., 2023). Pre-service teachers participating in this study were enrolled in a California online distance education teacher preparation program and were 18 years of age.

After a recruiting flyer (see Appendix A) was posted on a private social media Facebook page, participants who met the criteria were emailed a consent form. After the consent form (see Appendix B) was signed, interviews were scheduled on Zoom. An interview guide (see Appendix C) was used to interview 10 participants, and the transcripts that were collected were verified by the participants before uploading into NVivo 15 for analysis. The research questions were: What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

This qualitative phenomenological study had limitations, primarily regarding generalizability. With a purposive sample of 10 participants, the findings may not reflect the broader population. The study prioritized in-depth exploration of pre-service teachers' lived experiences over statistical analysis. Another limitation was potential researcher bias. The researcher's background and perspectives may have influenced data coding and theme

identification. For example, I was an adjunct instructor at one of the online, distance-education universities. Although member-checking helped mitigate this, complete objectivity is not possible in qualitative research. An additional limitation was that the scope of the study was limited to one 12-week academic course.

Collecting and analyzing in-depth qualitative data was time-intensive. However, despite time constraints, data analysis and theme development were fully conducted. The findings of the qualitative phenomenological study, evaluations, implications, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed in this chapter.

Findings

The recruitment strategy for my research began with posting a recruitment flyer on a private social media Facebook page. The recruitment flyer listed the individual criteria for participants interested in the study; participants must be currently enrolled in an online distance education program in a California teacher education program, and participants must be 18 years or older. Additionally, the flyer listed the activities that would be required of the participants to consist of a one-on-one interview on Zoom (45–60 minutes) and review the transcript via email for 10–15 minutes. The participants who were interested in participating and met the criteria were emailed the consent form. After the consent form was signed and emailed back to me, interviews were scheduled on Zoom.

The Zoom interviews were scheduled for 10 participants. An interview guide was used to conduct semi-structured interviews. The first items of the interview guide were to collect demographic information. The next set of questions were used to address Research Question 1 (RQ1), which focused on pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student

success. The next four questions were used to address Research Question 2 (RQ2), which focused on pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program and support systems that helped them succeed in the program. There were a total of 12 questions to encourage deep and detailed information.

Before the interview, permission was granted to record the session. The duration of the interview ranged from 16 to 60 minutes. The average interview session was 33 minutes. The interviews were recorded through Zoom. After each interview, transcripts were produced, and participants' names were replaced with Participant 1–10. Additionally, proper names were redacted for privacy. All participants were emailed their transcripts, and each member checked their transcripts. All 10 transcripts returned were stored in a secure folder. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Data saturation was determined by sufficient after 10 interviews.

Demographics

The demographics of the participants were obtained as part of the interview guide. Participants shared the current year that they were in the teacher preparation program. Also, participants shared the type of online distance education environment, such as asynchronous, synchronous, or blended. Furthermore, participants shared their gender. However, participants did not share the name of the online university. Table 2 shows the demographics of the interviewed participants in the qualitative phenomenological research study.

Table 2*Demographics of Interviewed Participants*

Participant	Years in teacher preparation program	Distance education environment
Participant 1	2.5	Blended
Participant 2	2	Blended
Participant 3	2	Blended
Participant 4	2	Blended
Participant 5	2.5	Blended
Participant 6	2	Blended
Participant 7	1.5	Blended
Participant 8	2	Blended
Participant 9	2.5	Blended
Participant 10	2.5	Blended

Braun and Clarke (2021) six-step thematic process was used to analyze the qualitative data. NVivo 15 software was used for the analysis of the member-checked transcripts. After the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software, they were read multiple times. Then the data was analyzed by coding ideas within the transcripts line by line. Coding line by line was completed several times to create coding data. The coding keywords and phrases that were related to (RQ1) were a lack of timely communication, university support provider, teacher placement, professors, lack of available office hours, lack of empathy, academic advisement, no support for testing, failure to answer questions, a lack of timely feedback, no feedback, lack of intervention, lack of

specific feedback. The coding keywords and phrases that were related to (RQ2) were outside university mentors, master teachers, colleagues, and classmates.

The third step was combining codes into themes. The initial codes were organized by identifying relationships. These relationships were grouped into major categories that reflected broader themes. For (RQ1), these categories were a lack of timely communication, university support providers, professors, a lack of empathy, academic advising, a lack of timely feedback, no feedback, a lack of intervention, a lack of specific feedback, lack of support for CalTPA. For (RQ2), these categories were university mentors, school-site mentors, faculty members, colleague relationships, peers, collaboration, small groups, and working independently. The categories were refined into themes. After careful review and modification, six themes emerged.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The trustworthiness of the data in this qualitative phenomenological research study followed the four pillars of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were encouraged to share their lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. Additionally, pre-service teachers shared lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program with support systems that helped them succeed in the program. Credibility is the first pillar to be obtained.

Credibility

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is the most crucial pillar of trustworthiness. Credibility is how the researcher interprets the participants' words in the findings report (Lodico et al., 2010). One way to establish credibility within your research study is to have member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks provide the participant with time

to review the transcript and make changes (Lodico et al., 2010). In this study, participants were emailed the transcript within a few hours of the Zoom interview to review and make any changes.

Dependability

Dependability criteria are met by describing in detail the step-by-step process of how the researcher plans on collecting and analyzing data (Lodico et al., 2010). An interview guide was created and reviewed for dependability by the chair and committee. Additionally, interviews were recorded and transcribed within the Zoom meetings for an additional layer of dependability. Finally, NVivo software guided the analysis process of coding, categorizing, and creating themes.

Confirmability

The steps that are required for confirmability are to keep a trail of data that can be confirmed and is not fictional (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interview transcripts and recordings were stored in a secure folder on a desktop that required a passcode. Additionally, member-checked transcripts were uploaded into a cloud-based software for analysis called NVivo 15. These are steps taken as part of securing the transferability of data.

Transferability

Based on the rich descriptions of the setting, the reader must decide if the findings would be transferable to a similar place (Lodico et al., 2010). For example, the qualitative phenomenological study setting is an online distance education California teacher preparation program. It is up to the reader to determine if the results will work within other educational settings, like face-to-face or in other states. However, all qualitative studies do not need to be transferable (Lodico et al., 2010).

RQ1

What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?

To answer the research question related to support systems needed for student success, participants actively answered six questions (see Appendix C). The questions were answered in one-on-one interviews to effectively address (RQ1). After coding data, line by line, patterns emerged. Participants shared such phrases as a lack of timely communication, a lack of available office hours, and a lack of empathy, which helped formulate the codes and categories for theme 1, lack of timely communication. The second theme for (RQ1) that was established was the lack of specific feedback. Theme two was created by analyzing patterns from participants, such as a lack of timely feedback, no feedback, and a lack of specific feedback. The table below shows evidence of findings connected to RQ1.

Table 3

Evidence of Findings Connected to (RQ1)

Research Question	Themes	Categories	Codes
What are pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?	Lack of timely communication	Lack of timely communication, university support providers, professors, lack of empathy, and academic advising	Lack of timely communication, university support provider, teacher placement, professors, lack of available office hours, lack of empathy, academic advisement, no support for testing, and failure to answer questions
	Lack of specific feedback	Lack of timely feedback, no feedback, lack of intervention, lack of specific feedback, lack of support for CalTPA.	Lack of timely feedback, no feedback, lack of intervention, lack of specific feedback

Theme 1: Lack of Timely Communication. The theme of lack of timely communication underscored the lack of support systems in a California online distance education teacher preparation program that ensured student success. Participant 1 stated, “But there was no checking in either, like, how's she doing so for a really new teacher. That's unfortunate. If that makes sense, I had more confidence because of my experience already.” Participant 3 said:

And she literally took, I think, 2 whole weeks to get back to me through email. And she's like, oh, I'm so sorry. Like I, I missed your email. But this is what I'm talking about. Like.

If you would have watched the videos or if you would have watched the recordings, or would have shown up to class. You know, like you wouldn't be so lost.

Participant 4 stated:

Definitely, there was a lot of breakdown regarding academic advisement. So first of all, the length of time it takes to answer a question from counseling, I feel, is not reasonable, because a lot of times students have a question that's kind of urgent, and we need to have an answer at least in 24 hours. And so I would often get an email response, saying, We're very sorry. But the advisor has 10 days to respond to you or something. And I'm thinking, well, I had this happen where I needed a response.

Participant 5 stated, "Every university usually has hundreds of potential student teachers that they have to place, and that comes down to again a little bit of communication breakdown in that, you know. You'll get an email. And then you wait." Additionally, Participant 6 stated, "Cause her office hours are from 3 to 3:30, and I'm also working as a full-time teacher. So, I find that very inconvenient." Additionally, Participant 7 stated:

I had my own classroom starting in August of this of 2024, and I thought by starting the program I was automatically in the internship program. But I wasn't. And there, there were no like clues or emails like, Hey, if you're employed, you should sign up for our internship program through the school. So there was none of that.

Furthermore, Participant 8 said, "I know I used this word once before, but I think there's a disconnect, and it's really kind of unfortunate. Now we're off Covid. I think being in the classroom and being part of that community would have helped." Lastly, Participant 9 shared:

Maybe they're quick to enroll people and then don't know how to manage it. But the people you know, the person assigned to like the field work. It was like, Oh, let me get

back to you. Let me find out. And where I was placed was actually student teachers, like people who were also embarking on the same journey as me. And so I brought that to the you know, University X. And then oh, we'll talk about it. But nothing came of that.

Theme 2: Lack of Specific Feedback. The theme of lack of specific feedback highlighted the lack of support systems in a California online distance education teacher preparation program that ensured student success. Lack of specific feedback was mentioned by participants. Participant 2 stated:

I'm not sure. I think it's possible that the teachers have too many students. I think, as well direct feedback. Their feedback method was, What is the word I'm looking for? It wasn't specific to me. They would take kind of like copy and paste goals that I had either met or not met, and put those. But I would. I would prefer actual. You know, feedback, personalized feedback. Yeah.

Additionally, Participant 3 said, "Maybe like the workload for them was probably a lot."

Participant 6 stated, "And I feel like she should be giving me feedback on how my lesson goes, instead of like the behaviors, because I teach extensive support needs." Participant 4 stated:

The Seminar course is designed to help us with our CalTPAs, and so I think in my instance, anyway, I feel like both professors meant well, but I feel like they were either new to it, or they hadn't been given enough guidance themselves, so I don't necessarily fault them. Additionally, Participant 10 stated:

As far as the CalTPA, there was limited support. I'm a resource teacher, so I'm a mild to moderate. She had me doing the wrong templates, so I did all the templates, and I fell behind. I should have turned mine in in June. But I'm turning it in today because I fell behind. After all, I was using the wrong templates and had to start over.

RQ2

What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

In one-on-one interviews, participants answered (RQ2) (see Appendix A). The questions were answered in one-on-one interviews to effectively address (RQ2). After coding data, line by line, patterns emerged from participants sharing words such as university mentors, master teachers, colleagues, peers, and outside university mentors. These codes were grouped into categories and created four themes. The four themes were mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration, which supported them in an online distance education teacher preparation program that helped them succeed in the program. Table 4 below shows evidence of findings connected to RQ2.

Table 4*Evidence of Findings Connected to RQ2*

Research Question	Codes	Categories	Themes
What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program	Outside university mentors, master teachers, colleagues, classmates	University mentors, school site mentors	Mentorships
	Outside university mentors, master teachers, faculty feedback, colleagues, classmates	Faculty members	Faculty feedback
	Outside university mentors, master teachers, faculty, colleagues, classmates, peers	Colleagues, relationships	Building colleague relationships
	Outside university mentors, master teachers, faculty, colleagues, classmates, peers	Peers, collaboration, small groups, working independently	Peer collaboration

Theme 1: Mentorships. Participants provided insights into the lived experiences regarding mentorships within the online distance education California teacher preparation programs. Participant 1 said, “I had an amazing mentor who was 10 years into teaching.” Participant 3 stated, “That was my master teacher at my student teaching placement. She was positive, I would say, and absolutely everything. She tried her best, you know. And I am so grateful to her.” Additionally, Participant 4 shared:

She's my university support provider. She's a vice principal at a school district nearby, and she was instrumental because I brought up my age and my husband's just decided to have heart problems. He was in the hospital, and I really thought, this is, I'm going to have to take time off school. I'm going to have to take a break, and I talked to her about it, and she just literally like, was she was the support system that I needed to help me get through. And so I ended up not having to take any time off. I was able to get through and push through, and it was because of her support.

Participant 7 stated, "I forgot to acknowledge my amazing internship mentor! She held my hand, and I love that service!" Finally, Participant 9 stated:

It's a scholarship, it's for like 1st generation, Hispanic Latinx, you know, Chicano students. So that came with like a grad student partner who came with more check-ins about how your semester is, you know, like on-site events, even though I'm not, you know, on campus, I still will get the notifications of it, so that support really helped financially, emotionally.

Theme 2: Faculty Feedback. Participants provided insights into the lived experiences regarding faculty members within the online distance education California teacher preparation program. Participant 1 stated, "I loved my professor! The professor gave immediate feedback. He was really good about that." Participant 4 said:

The professor actually said, "It's important for you to work as a group and as a team, because that's real life. And when you're in the school setting, you're going to have to work with your colleagues." And I said, "Fine, okay, I won't complain." And I ended up finding and meeting a dear friend, and she has just as high standards as I do.

Participant 5 stated, “The communication was really good, and he was good at answering questions and addressing any issues that students might have, and always responded within a day.” Participant 7 stated:

Every single professor that I've had at University X. If I have a question, I'll email or text. And I get a response within 24 hours, and some of them, some of them have given their cell phone numbers out, and I've been able to text them when I have a question on an assignment, and they get right back to me. So for me, that's invaluable like it's just been. I feel so supported by that, and that's why I would recommend the program to people is because when you have a question, they're there.

Participant 8 stated, “I had a teacher just this last month that was just above and beyond and embodied SEL, and had, you know, intro meetings individually, and exit meetings. And I mean, there are some excellent teachers.”

Theme 3: Building Colleague Relationships. Participants provided insights into the lived experiences regarding colleagues within the online distance education California teacher preparation program. Participant 1 stated:

I had made friends with my co-teacher because I am a multiple-subject subject at a middle school. So, we teach 2 subjects. She teaches history in English, and I teach math and science and so I'd already built that relationship with her and asked her to be my mentor. I had the support from her, too.

Additionally, Participant 3 said, “The colleagues that I had met throughout the years before I started student teaching, while I was still subbing. And yeah, I think I think it was them, but not through the university.” Participant 10 stated:

My special education coordinator is the best. She teaches me a lot, helps me with the writing. She's very hard on me when I write my IEPs, because she's I wants me to pass my class, so she's very hard on me.

Theme 4: Peer Collaboration. Participants provided insights into the lived experiences regarding peers within the online distance education California teacher preparation programs.

Participant 2 stated:

Yeah, I would. I would say that the collaborative element with peers was supportive. I received a lot of help when I wasn't receiving help from the mentors. I was receiving help from my peers, but that was also challenging.

Participant 4 said:

The professor said, It's important for you to work as a group and as a team, because that's real life. And when you're in the school setting, you're going to have to work with your colleagues. And I said, Fine, okay, I won't complain. And I ended up finding and meeting a dear friend, and she has just as high standards as I do.

Additionally, Participant 8 stated, “People were goofy, and we connected more than any other class.”

Evaluation of the Outcomes

The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lacked support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020; Yudt et al., 2023). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenology study was to explore the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. The research questions: (a) What are the pre-service teachers' lived

experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? (b)What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

Looking through the lens of Kolb's (2019) experiential learning cycle, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation exposed strong stages and breaks in the four stages of the experiential learning process. The evaluation of the outcomes provided six themes that addressed the study's problem and purpose. Themes for the first research question were a lack of timely communication and a lack of specific feedback. Themes for the second research question were mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration. Findings are evaluated through the lens of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, supported by literature, and aligned with each research question below

RQ1

What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?

Lack of Timely Communication. Participants in this study revealed that the lack of timely communication limited pre-service teachers' reflection and drawing conclusions on assignments. According to Kolb's (2013) experiential learning cycle, four stages are necessary for the developmental process to succeed: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. However, pre-service teachers' learning was interrupted in both the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages due to the

lack of timely communication from faculty. The disruption prevented pre-service teachers from moving to the final stage, active experimentation. Also, due to the four-week course timeframe, timely communication was imperative for participants' academic success. Researchers confirmed that students want faculty to be available for more questions and guided discussions (Tuckel & Pok-Carabalona, 2023; West et al., 2023). Participants noted that it may be due to the professor's large class size and heavy workload, which prevented timely communication. Furthermore, pre-service teachers shared that the lack of timely communication by faculty, not providing a flexible office hour schedule, and timely email responses to student questions regarding assignments led to frustration and slowed their academic success.

Lack of Specific Feedback. Pre-service teachers disclosed that the lack of specific feedback from faculty encouraged them to seek feedback from peers and other professionals outside the university. Looking through the lens of Kolb's (2013) conceptual framework, the middle stages, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization were broken due to a lack of specific feedback. Pre-service teachers skipped a crucial stage in reflecting and drawing conclusions, ultimately leading to a break in the experiential learning cycle. Tuckel and Pok-Carabalona, (2023) stated that students felt isolated during the week when faculty did not provide specific feedback to confirm students' understanding of the materials. Participants wanted specific feedback that was related to their coursework assignments and teaching practice to guide them through reflection, conclusion, and ultimately application of a new understanding of content.

RQ2

What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

Mentorships. Participants spoke about the positive effects of mentorships on their academic success and teaching practice. Participants shared specific mentorship supports, such as on-campus check-ins, empathy for personal situations, and being flexible with assignment due dates. Analyzing through Kolb's (2013) experiential learning theory, mentorship aligns with the concrete experience stage. For example, mentors provided feedback and guided practice to pre-service teachers in a real-world environment. Researchers found that when teacher candidates participate in field observations and student teaching practicum, they feel supported by their mentors and faculty supervisors (Holyoke et al., 2023). In this study, participants shared that mentorships were one reason they succeeded in the program.

Faculty Feedback. Analysis of participants' interviews shared the importance of faculty members being available for questions, concerns, and immediate feedback. Faculty feedback effectively aligns with reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages. Kolb's (2013) middle stages of the experiential learning cycle, reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, were easily obtained when pre-service teachers shared being able to apply faculty feedback to assignments and form new understandings of content. Karal and Ozdemir Sarialioglu (2022) show that 96.9% of students found instructor feedback helpful in providing support for their assignments. In this study, faculty feedback was important for pre-service teachers' academic success.

Building Colleague Relationships. Looking through the lens of Kolb's (2013) experiential theory, colleague feedback occurs through concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization stages. For example, colleagues provide feedback to the pre-service teacher regarding classroom management. Then, pre-service teachers move into the second stage, reflective observation by asking themselves about their teaching practice, what went well, and what needs to improve. Finally, flowing into the third stage, abstract conceptualization, by encouraging participants to create a new plan of instruction based on colleagues' feedback. Participants confirmed the importance of colleagues at the school site who supported them by providing emotional and instructional support, learning activities, and classroom management ideas. Building colleague relationships was important for pre-service teachers' confidence and applying teaching practices.

Peer Collaboration. In this study, peers supported pre-service teachers by collaborating within the courses. Kolb's (2013) experiential learning theory, peer collaboration effectively aligns with reflective observation and active experimentation, where peers collaborate, sharing ideas and reflecting on teaching practices. Participants shared the importance of peers within the blended learning environment that allowed collaboration on projects and peer-to-peer communication. Researchers found that pre-service teachers enjoyed collaborating in online forums discussing teaching practicum, reflection, and building an online community (Cohen, 2021; Eisenback, 2021).

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The problem addressed in this study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs often lack support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020; Yudit et al., 2023). The purpose of this

qualitative phenomenological study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. There were two research questions: (a) What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? (b) What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

Six themes emerged from this qualitative phenomenological study. These themes were a lack of communication, a lack of specific feedback, mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration. The two themes, lack of communication and lack of specific feedback, reflect the lack of support systems to ensure academic success. The four themes: mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration share the positive support systems that provide pre-service teachers with academic success in a California online teacher preparation program. This next section reflected implications, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Implications

The implications for this study were aligned with two research questions. Research question one (RQ1): What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? Research question two (RQ2): What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program? The themes were aligned under each research question. The six themes discussed below were a lack of timely feedback, a lack of specific

feedback, mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration.

RQ1

What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?

The first theme that emerged from the participants was the lack of timely communication in their online distance education California teacher preparation program. The lack of timely communication from university faculty and staff led to pre-service teachers feeling dismissed, ignored, and, in one case, wanting to leave the program. This finding implies that a lack of timely communication within the teacher preparation program may result in pre-service teachers feeling undervalued, overlooked, and isolated, which may lead to limiting student success.

This finding expands on previous research of pre-service teachers and faculty knowledge and application of digital literacy skills in an online distance education teacher preparation program to communicate (Chang & Lee, 2022; Hefer Bembenutty, 2023). Additionally, using effective digital technologies for timely student-faculty interaction (Laura, 2021). Furthermore, student-faculty communication and interaction during the week results in students feeling less isolated (Tuckel & Pok-Carabalona, 2023).

The second theme that materialized was the lack of specific feedback. The lack of specific feedback from professors led to pre-service teachers feeling confused, overwhelmed, and lacking academic support. The implication is that a lack of specific feedback in the online distance education teacher preparation program may leave pre-service teachers feeling discouraged and unclear about expectations, restricting opportunities for student success.

This finding aligns with previous research stating that immediate feedback in a blended learning environment is a challenge for the instructor using a variety of technological platforms (Hasnain, 2022; Laura, 2021; Rasheed et al., 2020). Additionally, it expands on prior research that found 44% of students preferred synchronous online learning to receive immediate feedback from faculty (West et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings align with prior research stating 96.9% of students found immediate faculty feedback helpful in providing support for their assignments (Karal & Ozdemir Sarialioglu, 2022; Mohamed et al., 2023).

RQ2

What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

The first theme that transpired was mentorships. Participants shared their lived positive experiences of the importance of a mentor on their academic success, teaching practice, and emotional well-being. The implication is that mentorships can offer real-world teaching strategies and support to pre-service teachers.

This finding is consistent with previous research, which found that when teacher candidates participate in field observations and student teaching practicum, they feel supported by their mentors and faculty supervisors (Holyoke et al., 2023). Finally, pre-service teachers were active participants when they had a direct system of support (Holyoke et al., 2023).

The second theme was faculty feedback. Participants shared the importance of faculty members who provided specific feedback on assignments and CalTPA. Participants suggested that specific feedback for assignments and CalTPA provided the opportunity to revise and

support their academic success. The implication is that faculty feedback in an online distance teacher preparation program may support pre-service teachers' academic success.

The findings align with prior research that found pre-service teachers were able to revise assignments with immediate feedback (Xie et al., 2021). Furthermore, it builds upon how immediate feedback is used to confirm that the students understand the material (Tuckel & Pok-Carabalona, 2023). Finally, the findings enrich the importance of allowing space for students to ask questions to faculty to provide feedback (Cohen, 2021; Hill, 2021; Karal & Ozdemir Sarialioglu, 2022; Kosar, 2021).

The third theme was that building colleague relationships was a source of support. Pre-service teachers shared that the support from their colleagues in the work environment was another reason for success in the teacher preparation program. The implication is that building colleague relationships may provide pre-service teachers with confidence, instructional strategies, and student learning activities to apply to their classroom. The finding is consistent with previous research that found pre-service teachers collaborating in online forums helpful in discussing teaching practicum, reflection, and building online community (Cohen, 2021; Eisenback, 2021).

The final theme was that peer collaboration was a source of support for pre-service teachers. Participants shared that the support from peers was important to their academic success, emotional well-being, and future career. The implication is that the peer-peer interaction in an online distance education teacher preparation program may provide student success, a sense of belonging, and professional engagement to ensure pre-service teacher success.

The finding aligns with prior research consistent with structured synchronous break-out groups by building student confidence through peer-to-peer interactions (Saltz & Heckman,

2020; West et al., 2023). Additionally, the structured groups improved peer-to-peer interaction and increased learning activity (Saltz & Heckman, 2020). Furthermore, critical thinking skills are fostered when discussion board prompts are meaningful and link to real-world applications (Keerigan & Aghekyan, 2022).

Recommendations for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. The study revealed two areas of improvement that pre-service teachers experienced: (1) a lack of timely communication, (2) a lack of specific feedback. Based on these findings, a gap in communication and specific feedback prevented pre-service teachers from reflecting, analyzing, and applying new ideas into practice. These communication gaps align with Kolb's (2015) experiential four stage learning cycle. The following recommendations are presented to improve communication, enhance specific feedback, and experiential learning within an online distance education California teacher preparation program.

The first recommendation for the lack of timely communication would be to provide faculty and staff with a specific time in the day to respond to emails (8 AM to 9 AM and 4 PM to 5 PM). Participants shared that the response time to emails was often over two weeks within a four-week course. Moreover, participants shared that the accelerated online distance education course schedule makes it imperative for faculty and staff to promptly reply to students' emails. Aligning with Kolb's (2015) first two stages of experience and reflection, continuous communication between students and faculty is essential for pre-service teachers to participate in the cyclic process.

The distance education committee or the faculty chair may add specific email response times within the handbook. Also, requiring faculty to include a link within their signature email to an office hour scheduler, like Calendly, to ensure a variety of times faculty are available for students. These steps can improve pre-service teachers' feelings of being undervalued, overlooked, and isolated while offering faculty ways to increase communication with students.

The second recommendation for the lack of specific feedback would be to provide training for faculty on how to provide specific feedback for online assignments and CalTPA. Participants revealed that faculty feedback for assignments and CalTPA was pre-written and not specific to their assignments. One possible solution that participants shared was to reduce the teacher preparation course size to allow faculty to provide individual feedback. Additionally, participants were frustrated that there was no CalTPA guidance at their university. Instead, pre-service teachers were instructed to sign up for workshops at other universities or seek help from private tutors. Specific feedback is required to ensure pre-service success to move from conceptualization to the experimentation stage within Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle.

Faculty leaders and instructional designers may create asynchronous training for faculty. The asynchronous training may consist of faculty presenting actionable video feedback within 5 minutes. This training can improve the faculty's ability to provide specific feedback and ensure the faculty's competence in digital learning tools. Furthermore, it may reduce pre-service teachers' feelings of being discouraged and unclear about expectations, restricting opportunities for student success.

Moreover, faculty leaders and instructional designers can create synchronous training for faculty that builds on prior actionable feedback learning activities from the asynchronous training. The synchronous Zoom training consists of break-out groups that analyze vague and

actionable feedback. This training ensures faculty experience the reflection and conceptualization process within Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle by offering faculty engaging and collaborative learning experiences to ensure understanding, reflection, and application of specific feedback for both pre-service teachers' assignments and CalTPA revisions.

The overall goal was to provide recommendations to improve communication, enhance specific feedback, and experiential learning within an online distance education California teacher preparation program. The findings provided two deficiencies: (1) a lack of timely communication and (2) a lack of specific feedback. Due to a lack of timely communication and a lack of specific feedback, pre-service teachers' experiential learning experience was interrupted. Offering recommendations for implementing specific hours to respond to student emails, embedding a digital scheduler within faculty emails, and asynchronous and synchronous training on providing specific feedback may ensure student success. The section below will provide recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

The qualitative phenomenological study was limited to one private social media group, a small population, and focused on California pre-service teachers. Therefore, the findings may not reflect all online distance education teacher preparation programs. Future research is needed to build on the findings of the study a lack of timely communication, a lack of specific feedback, and expand on the experiential learning cycle in an online distance education environment.

The first recommendation for future research addresses a lack of timely communication. Researchers may explore the same qualitative phenomenological study presented, but with faculty. The future study would explore faculty's teaching in an online California teacher

preparation program. Exploring the faculty's challenges in an online teacher preparation program would provide another perspective and expand on the experiential learning cycle.

A quantitative correlational study would be another recommendation for future studies to examine the interaction between the timeliness of faculty communication and ensuring student success in an online teacher preparation program. One instrument that may be used is a scale survey that could be sent to a larger population to build on the current study. This quantitative study would build off the current findings.

The next recommendation for future research addresses the second theme, a lack of specific feedback. Future research recommendations could build off this study by using a qualitative descriptive study to provide a summary of faculty experiences when it comes to a lack of specific feedback to pre-service teachers. The instrument used to collect data could be a combination of the following: open-ended surveys, focus groups, or interviews. The results would add to the current study findings.

In this study, there was a mix of male and female participants. However, these groups were not examined. A future research recommendation is to explain the difference between these two groups (male and female) by using a quantitative causal-comparative design to see if male and female pre-service teachers differ in their perceptions of specific faculty feedback.

Conclusion

The problem addressed in this qualitative phenomenological research study was that online distance education California pre-service teacher preparation programs lack support systems to ensure student success (Chang & Lee, 2022; Rasheed & Adbullah, 2020, Yudt et al., 2023). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to understand pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation

program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success. Two research questions were provided to participants. These research questions were: (RQ1) What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success? (RQ2) What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program? Six themes were revealed: a lack of communication, a lack of specific feedback, mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration.

The qualitative phenomenological study revealed that the online distance California education teacher preparation programs have a blend of ineffective and effective support systems. The two ineffective online support systems are a lack of timely communication and a lack of specific feedback. Researchers support that there is a lack of innovative support systems within online distance teacher education platforms (Chang & Lee, 2022; Holyoke et al., 2023). Nevertheless, positive support systems are effectively being used within the online teacher preparation platform, mentorship, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration, which align with Kolb's experiential four-stage learning cycle.

According to Kolb's (2015) experiential learning cycle, which involves concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, California pre-service teachers engaged well in the concrete experience phase by participating in meaningful online assignments. However, limited communication and feedback hindered their progress through reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. Without timely faculty communication and specific assignment and CalTPA feedback, pre-service teachers could not fully reflect, make revisions, and modify assignments or CalTPA to make a smooth transition

into active experimentation. While experiential learning opportunities existed in the California online distance education teacher preparation program, a lack of timely communication and a lack of specific feedback limited full participation in Kolb's (2015) four stages. Improving timely communication and providing specific feedback will enhance pre-service teacher support through Kolb's experiential learning cycle in an online distance teacher preparation program.

The time to review online California teacher preparation programs is now. Even though CTC (2024) confirms that 62% of California teacher candidates do not complete their programs. Faculty leads, online distance education committees, and instructional designers are at the forefront of developing various effective support systems for pre-service teachers. Effective support systems, such as timely communication, specific feedback, mentorships, faculty feedback, building colleague relationships, and peer collaboration, are needed to ensure the success of pre-service teachers in online teacher preparation programs and provide California with credentialed teachers in the classroom.

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Appendices

Appendix C

Interview Guide

The researcher will use semi-structured interview protocol for conducting Zoom interview. Following are the steps and open-ended questions for the interview:

- Greet the participant and thank them for their time.
- Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the study.
- Provide an overview of the interview structure and estimate duration (60 minutes).
- Ensure the participant has read and signed the informed consent form.
- Explain confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw at any time.
- Ask for permission to audio-record the interview.

Interview Questions

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. What is your current California online distance education teacher preparation program environment? Asynchronous, synchronous or blended learning environment
2. How long have you been taking online distance education classes in the teacher preparation program?

Section 2:

What are the pre-service teachers' lived experiences in an online distance education California teacher preparation program that often lacks support systems to ensure student success?

1. Share a time during your online teacher preparation program where you thought support services were lacking?
2. What support services were lacking in your online teacher preparation program?
3. How were the support services lacking in your online teacher preparation program?
4. Why do you think the support services were lacking in your online teacher preparation program?
5. What support services would you like to have had during your teacher preparation program?
6. How would these support services have helped you to succeed in your teacher preparation program?

Section 3:

What experiences do pre-service teachers in an online distance education California teacher preparation program have with support systems that have helped them succeed in the program?

1. Share a specific experience of using a support system within your online teacher preparation program that guided you to succeed in the program?
2. What specific support services helped you succeed in the online teacher preparation program?
3. How were the support services helpful in your success?
4. Why do you think the support services were helpful in your success in the online teaching program?