The Experience of

Middle School Special Education Teachers in New Jersey

Teaching Virtually During COVID-19

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of middle school special education teachers working remotely in New Jersey during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Schlossberg's Transition Theory refers to events that result in a change of relationships, routines, assumptions, or roles. This theory allowed me to see the various phases such as moving in, through, and out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing how the pandemic affected the relationships, routines, and roles of teachers made it easy to understand how this theory related directly to the pandemic. The data collection was gathered through interviews. I based the interviews on those participants who qualified for this study and responded appropriately to surveys. I ensured that the participants understood the purpose of the study and that being a participant in this study was strictly voluntary. There was no monetary compensation. The participants were given the DASS and SWLS scale prior to conducting the interview. The researcher reviewed and scored the scales prior to conducting interviews. The researcher read through the interview transcripts and identified the commonalities of the data. Coding was also utilized and allowed the researcher to analyze the data, identify themes, and see commonalities. The researcher established the relationship among the various data points by organizing the data into codes to remain objective. The researcher established the most important themes that were identified and discussed by the participants. The themes identified in this study were the lack of social interaction, the overall ongoing technology issues, the difficulties of having students consistently attending school on a daily basis while remaining engaged and focused, and stress and anxiety amongst the teachers.

Keywords: anxiety, stress, depression, burnout, pandemic, COVID-19

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Dedication

*"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord
thoughts of peace, and not of evil,
to give you an expected end."*
Jeremiah 29:11

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Shirley A. Mack. When there was no plan for me in life, you made sure I had one without hesitation. Without you, I would not be the person I am today, and I would not be where I am in life. There are not enough words to describe how eternally grateful I am for the love, time, and protection you have provided me. Thank you for praying the prayer of protection over my life ensuring that I was always covered. You prayed for me when I was not able to pray for myself. You prayed for me in secret, knowing there would be moments in my life I needed it. Times were not always easy; however, I watched you persevere and turn nothing into something on many occasions. The sacrifices you made for me to give me a better chance in life have not gone unnoticed. Many people do not know the story of all the sacrifices you have made from the beginning of my life, but all stories do not need to be told or explained. You have given me so much inspiration and motivation, and I find myself trying to do the same for my children. You taught me to create my own path, even if it is a difficult path to take—to take it and not be afraid. You taught me to work hard for what I want, and I am trying to do my best. So, this is for you and all the hard work you have poured into my life. Thank you is not enough but it is a start! Thanks, mom—I love you!

Acknowledgments

Completing this study was not easy. I would not have been able to complete this study without the support of my committee, family, and friends. I appreciate everyone for keeping me focused and helping me stay on task throughout this process. No matter what, you kept pushing but you kept pushing me to complete this goal. My sounding boards, Drs. Santiago, Chapman, Block-Ropiecki, and Ford, thank you for always listening and sharing your experiences as a way of motivation. You helped keep the light shining when it was dim.

Thank you to my children Trey, Kendra, Keenan, and Breyona. You have inspired me beyond words, and everything I do is for you. Unconditional love is real, please always believe that! Thank you Joseph M. Tumpkin for being my support and backbone when I became frustrated. There were times when you talked me off the ledge; this was definitely role reversal at its best. I love you and appreciate you!

Dr. Walsh, thank you for making the decision to take this adventure with me. You never hesitated to take my study when it initially came across your desk. From our first conversation, you were encouraging, inspiring, and a true motivator. I came to our first meeting with a lot of uncertainty and questions, but you took your time and answered all my questions. Your guidance and support throughout this process have been amazing. You gave me confidence when I was feeling overwhelmed and walked me through some difficult moments—I appreciate it. "We" are getting it done together like we stated in our first meeting.

Dr. Milacci, my reader, thank you for your invaluable knowledge throughout this process. You helped give guidance to a plan at a crucial time in the study. Your expertise in the process cannot be measured. Your examples are always on point and relatable to true life

situations, leading to a better understanding. You showed passion each time we spoke and made sure I was clear on the expectations.

Finally, thank you to everyone who has taken the time to be on this committee. I appreciate your willingness to participate and serve in this process. Thank you!

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Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Working From Home (WFH)

World Health Organization (WHO)

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Chapter One

Overview

This chapter provides information about how the pandemic was brought to the attention of the world and the impact it had on community. When Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) first gained attention in the United States, it was small headline news that was initially overlooked by many. Then, in matter of days, it grew into a media frenzy. By January 2020, this pandemic captured headline news nationally because of the severity of this new national crisis. As a result of COVID-19, the world had to make immediate changes and society had to restructure the everyday activities and routines people were accustomed to. Suddenly, the world was at a standstill. How people communicated with one another changed. The way people were able to care for families changed. The work environment changed because of businesses shutting down and requiring their employees to stay at home. Educational institutions changed the way children were taught because of the emergency school closing orders by the government at every level. The government strategically placed preventative measures into place such as travel restrictions, mask wearing indoors, social distancing, the reduction of large crowds of people indoors and limits on indoor gatherings. People were strongly encouraged to avoid any type of close contact with individuals who had underlying health issues or were immunocompromised. There was immediate closure of all nonessential businesses and stay-at-home orders were put into effect.

One of the major institutions most directly impacted by the stay-at-home order was education. To reduce the spread, contamination, and transmission of COVID-19, elementary schools, secondary schools, colleges, and universities were closed. Although schools were physically closed, districts were still obligated to continue educating students under federal law despite the rare and unusual circumstance." The influenza pandemic of 1918 was on a similar scale to COVID-19, so there was plenty of documentation of a previous pandemic. Schools were abruptly closed, and teachers found the adjustments to remote learning challenging (Klapproth et al., 2020). Teachers were quickly overwhelmed. The way the curriculum was presented and understanding how to navigate through the technology piece, while also keeping students engaged virtually presented challenges. Teachers and students must learn to adapt to virtual instruction because this has never before been a part of the delivery process to educate students.

The study conducted by Moore-Adams et al. (2016) discussed how teachers should be knowledgeable in pedagogy, technology, and content to start to understand how to implement the curriculum in the virtual environment. Moving from face-to-face learning to remote learning takes planning. However, there was minimal time for proper planning from every angle. Teachers were informed they were going to educate students remotely; however, they felt as though they were being thrust into remote teaching without proper training or preparation (Glessner and Johnson, 2020). Remote learning has never occurred on this magnitude. According to Rice (2022), teachers were striving to make sure students would benefit from learning remotely by using various technologies and shifting instructional modalities. Teachers also felt overwhelmed by trying to maintain communication with parents. According to Rice (2022), teachers learned to utilize social media, video conferencing, more telephone conversations, and email to maintain communication with parents and legal guardians. This was a change as well

because previously parents could physically come to the school to meet with their child's

teacher, but this was no longer the norm.

Background

COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Almonacid-Fierro, 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO) described COVID-19 as an infectious disease—a newer

discovered coronavirus that infected individuals' respiratory systems (Aboagye et al.,

2020). This disease is considered an extremely contagious, severe, acute respiratory syndrome

that quickly spread around the world and caused many to be sick in addition to many deaths for

adults, especially those with other underlying health issues. For example, Ratto et al., (2021)

stated that from the start of the pandemic to September 2020, the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-

2) pandemic left more than 30 million confirmed cases and one million deaths. From January

2020 to September 2021, there were approximately 895,693 excess deaths associated with

COVID-19 and there was 26% more than what was later reported (Soto et al., 2020). The impact

of COVID-19 affected the world as a whole and trickled down to the United States, to individual

States, and to every community.

Before COVID-19, working from home was not a part of the accustomed societal norm.

There was only a small percentage of individuals who worked from the comfort of their homes.

Prior to COVID-19, 7.6 percent of individuals were working from home; however, the total

number quadrupled in February 2020 to an astounding 31.4 percent (Brick et al., 2020).

According to a recent study conducted by Barrero et al.,(2021) in March 2021 approximately 45

percent of paid labor workers were working from home. Teaching, educating, and working from

home (WFH), became a reality in 2020 for all educators. This included every position working

within a school system. Because of COVID-19, working from home was dramatically

accelerated because of all the restrictions that were implemented. Thus, Barrero et al., (2021), explained that between April 2020 and December 2020, only 5 percent of paid work hours were from home. Educating students in the manner teachers are accustomed means that students attend a physical building for school daily and teachers educate students face-to-face in a classroom setting. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, the government closed the doors to every educational institution grade K–12, colleges, and universities. The entire world was closed. A stay-at-home order was implemented for everyone who was required to shelter in place and all nonessential businesses were temporarily closed. The only exceptions given were for businesses that were essential such as healthcare facilities, grocery stores, pet food stores, law enforcement, and certain government agencies.

The world started to gain more knowledge and insight into the global health emergency, now known as COVID-19, in January 2020. However, the severity of this pandemic was not truly recognized until March 2020. This pandemic forced widespread school closures in the United States and across the world. There was worldwide concern that students could increase the spread of the virus to adults and to those who are at risk from underlying health issues, and officials determined that all school buildings must close immediately (Bendeck, 2022). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) determined there were at least 124,00 private- and public-school closures during the 2019–2020 school year. The closure of schools affected more than 55.1 million students in K–12 in the United States.

Although the world had been impacted by other viruses in the past, the noticeable difference is that educational institutions did not close. There have been other pandemics the world has encountered, for such as plague, cholera, flu, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV;

Piret & Boivin, 2021). When one of the previous pandemics occurred, different health measures were implemented to help prevent the spread that did not require stay-at-home orders. In the past, pandemics have been controlled differently than how COVID-19 is managed today (Piret & Boivin, 2021). With this pandemic, the most effective way to help control the spread was through isolation and quarantine. These interventions were put into place to help maintain the structure of society to the best of the government's ability.

Because of the severity of the pandemic's onset, every form of the media imaginable nationally and locally; for example, television, public broadcasting, newspaper, radio, social media, etc., began to launch reports concerning COVID-19. No one knew exactly what the disease entailed or what the ramifications of this health crisis would be. The fear of the unknown aspects of COVID-19 was overwhelming, especially because, although other viruses had affected the United States in the past, this pandemic was different on many levels.

The impact that COVID-19 had on intercontinental communities and individuals affected many sectors of the world, including the institution of education. Because of the seriousness of this contagious disease, the government was forced to find an alternative way to have schools function without interruptions to the students' education. In the study by Garbe et al., (2020), results showed that nearly 200 countries had to close the doors to their educational institutions and implement remote learning. Remote learning was the new way students would be educated over the months to come. Students had to learn to log in to classes, adapt to a new platform of learning, and participate in a different space outside of the school building which was home (Rice, 2022). The outbreak caused panic because of the possibility of catching the virus and suffering its severe consequences, therefore isolating, social distancing, and wearing masks became the standard. There were school districts that were more academically prepared than

others to educate students remotely. School districts that did not rely on federal funding perhaps had the appropriate financial support already in place to continue to educate their students seamlessly. Various institutions rely on federal funding to properly educate their students, leaving some school districts scrambling to find the financial means to implement remote learning. Every student was required to have access to technology such as a computer or chromebook in addition to internet service within their home to have access to their virtual classroom. There are some school districts that did not have financial difficulties and technology was not a concern. Because of the implementation of remote learning, every student had to be provided with a chromebook and internet services at the cost of the school district. But could every school district financially afford to provide such technology if some were at a socioeconomic disadvantage?

Understanding and knowing the impact federal funding has on a school district is important. There are school districts that are capable of sustaining their programming on their own; however, there are some that rely on federal funding, such as a Title I School District. A Title I School District receives extra funding for disadvantaged students from the federal government (Lyons, 2006). Some school districts rely heavily on federal funding to assist with academic and financial support for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Title I funding continues to be the most extensively funded component of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Title I funds are given to school districts to assist with improving the academic outcomes for students. Most of the money is spent on salaries and benefits to make sure the district is meeting the requirements for personnel and hiring highly qualified teachers. There were some school districts that were more prepared than others because of their funding availability.

Situation to Self

Deciding to conduct this study about COVID-19's effect on schools was one of the most rewarding moments I have encountered during my tenure in the field of education. Although COVID-19 was a challenging experience, it allowed people to learn to work together during one of the most difficult times in history to ensure the education of students continued with the least amount of interruption and disruption possible. I recall during the first few months of virtual learning many students thought the concept of learning from home was going to be fun and easy. After all, the students thought sleeping in late and being able to learn from their home every day would be great. However, over time, their feelings changed drastically.

From a social worker's perspective, there are many concerns in addition to the student's education. School is a safe haven for many students for a variety of different reasons. School is a place where students can talk with staff and not be judged, have at least two meals, and have the opportunity to socialize with their peers. The social-emotional wellbeing of students is important for me. Schools provided a social-emotional learning environment for students daily. This came to a halt once virtual learning put into place.

Working in a public school district allows me to see different perspectives on the educational field from a variety of angles. Because I work with the administration, teachers, parents, and students, I can listen to the perspective of everyone about their experiences moving through COVID-19. As a social worker, I find joy and fulfillment in working with the diverse population of individuals I in my community. Although I work in a specific school district, all school districts are not managed the same. The climate and culture can be different in every school district. Some employees' perspectives are different because of their perspectives on how they are treated by their administration. I am curious to find out their perspective on how remote

learning has affected them and their school district. I have seen different commentary via social media from people in the educational field and their perspectives on working through remote learning. I believe everyone's opinions matter no matter their job title. Seeing my own colleagues working through the pandemic has sparked my curiosity about the perspective of workers in other school districts during the pandemic and whether their experiences were similar or different. I have seen firsthand how my school district and other school district employees were affected by the implementation of remote learning. Some employees had a positive outlook on remote learning while others retired after their experience because of being overwhelmed. The face of education changed right before my eyes in a short period of time and understanding the perspective of others has sparked my curiosity.

In conducting this research, I am eager to find out how COVID-19 has affected my peers working in neighboring school districts as well. I wanted to specifically focus on the middle school population because that is the population I work with directly. Completing this research allowed me to further look at the needs of the community I serve. My research is beneficial in case my school district has to revert to remote learning in the future. The data I collected gave me the ability to understand how I can better serve my community directly. I have been truly blessed to have the ability to work in this field and still feel the love and commitment. God has put this desire in my heart to help others at an early age, and I continue to have the passion for giving back. I love my career and enjoy knowing that I have helped my community make progress day by day in the return to face-to-face learning. I cherish the opportunities that I have been given because I realize that not every individual loves the career path that they have chosen or that has chosen them. To continue to have the burning desire and the ability to positively

impact those I encounter is a blessing, and I look forward to working with my peers, administration, students, parents, and the members of the community.

Problem Statement

Being a teacher is one of the most sought-after and well-respected professions; however, it can also be one of the most stressful. According to Travers (2017), teaching has been recognized as one of the most stressful of all occupations over time. Researchers Mearns and Cain (2003) also studied how teaching school is a highly stressful occupation. Teachers in general have experienced stress and anxiety at a high level and an alarming rate within the last few years–even more since COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill A study conducted by Stapleton et al., (2020) distinguished the high levels of stress identified in the teaching profession compared to other occupations. Because of the high level of stress, many teachers have displayed some mental health issues that are directly attributed to the high demands required of their profession. Teachers reported that the pandemic affected their quality of life when it came to their relationships with their students. This added stress for both teachers and students (Almonacid-Fierro, 2021). An article by Allen (2020) stated that teachers were reporting and documenting very high work-related anxiety. This further supports there being a direct association between anxiety, stress, and depressive disorder, according to Stapleton et al., (2020). The factors contributing to the decline of mental health in teachers have been addressed in previous studies; however, it has not been studied within the Pleasantville School District, which is a Title I school district.

According to Wu et al., (2020), the impact of COVID-19 affected society, and because of the closure of every educational institution, grades K–12 had to implement emergency remote learning. As a result of the emergency mandate of school closure by the government in addition

to social distancing, not every institution was immediately prepared to transition smoothly to remote learning. Although no one was prepared for the closing of schools, it was the responsibility of each district to adhere to the federal laws that promise access to online technologies for all students (Swenson & Ryder, 2016). The study by Bendeck (2022) discussed how the federal government did not have time to research the best, most effective, or appropriate ways to educationally deliver the curriculum to students without interruption. There was no federal guidance in place for any educational institution as to how to maintain standards, resulting in every school district having to devise its own educational delivery methods to meet the needs and standards of its students. The standards and requirements for educating students did not change although the platform for educating students changed. According to Chan (2021), many educational agencies, such as K–12 schools, were forced to quickly transition to emergent remote teaching (ERT) to prevent educational loss for the students. Many educational institutions wanted to return to in-person learning; however, safety was paramount, and the pandemic was still a national concern. According to Pressley et al., (2021), it is important to acknowledge the impact that teaching during the pandemic had on educators. Many educators felt anxiety and stress caused by the additional expectations and by not being prepared to teach online school or having the ability to move between modalities easily (Smith et al., 2016).

The requirements for teaching students changed. Unfortunately, teachers were not prepared or well versed in remote teaching and the curriculum that was being taught was geared toward face-to-face instruction rather than remote instruction. Because of the instantaneous closure of all educational institutions, teachers were not fully prepared mentally or physically, nor were they technologically inclined to accurately plan or prepare for remote learning. Before COVID-19, there was a significant number of teachers in the United States who experienced

psychological distress, burnout, and stress. There was a spike in anxiety rates among teachers and COVID-19 brought various physical and mental health concerns for teachers (Lizana & Lera, 2022). Teachers were stressed and struggling to meet the needs of the students they were required to teach. A recent study by Silva et al., (2021) revealed there were high depression, anxiety, and stress rates among teachers. Because of the increase in stress and burnout, there was a concern about the teacher's well-being. According to Stapleton et al., (2020), there is a direct association between anxiety, stress, and depressive disorder. Some teachers chose to leave the teaching profession because of increased demands that were required for and directly associated with teaching remotely.

Current teachers have experienced stress and anxiety at a high level and at an alarming rate within the last few years which was caused by the pandemic. Because of the level of stress, many teachers have some mental health concerns that are directly attributed to the high demand required of their profession. The factors causing teachers to feel overwhelmed and have mental health are concerning and need to be examined and studied. The study conducted by Lizana and Lera (2022) revealed that high stress levels were reported by teachers during COVID-19. In addition, the topics of depression and anxiety as they relate to the teaching profession demand immediate attention so that strategies can be put into place to reduce the number of teachers who develop mental health concerns.

Purpose Statement

My purpose for this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of middle school special education teachers working remotely in New Jersey during the COVID-19 pandemic. At this stage in my research, COVID-19 and middle school teacher's experiences will be generally defined by how they described their experiences. Middle school special

education teachers in New Jersey were impacted by COVID-19. According to Eulberg (2023), 61 percent of educators reported they always or often felt stressed—more so than any other profession. COVID-19 has affected the teaching profession severely since remote instruction was implemented (Eulberg, 2023). The State of New Jersey was mandated to close schools and implement remote learning during 2019–2020 (March 2020–June 2020) and the entire 2020–2021 school year. For this study, special education teachers were asked to share their experience with remote learning and disclose any stress or anxiety they felt while teaching their students during the pandemic. The researcher will examine the direct impact COVID-19 had on the educators who were teaching students remotely within the Pleasantville School District. By conducting this study, I wanted to raise awareness of the difficulties that special education teachers encountered while educating their students remotely during the pandemic.

Significance of the Study

In my research, I addressed factors that affected the lives of middle school special education teachers who taught remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic in New Jersey. This study can be utilized as a guide in the future in the case of another emergency closing of educational institutions and the mandated implementation of remote learning for the safety of the community.

The profession of teaching is important because it allows educators to make a difference in the lives of children by modeling and shaping their lives. Based on the literature that has been reviewed to date, teachers are feeling anxiety and depression more now than in the past. There have been some high levels of stress that have been documented within the teaching profession when compared to other professions (Stapleton et. al., 2020). Digging deeper into how the teaching profession has been affected would be valuable to the institution of education. This

would allow further insight into delivery methods, accommodations, challenges, or any changes that affect the delivery of education for the education of students. According to Haaren-Mack et. al. (2020), some of the causes of stress are the workload, targets, and performance in the classrooms; the relationship with the students, the relationship with their colleagues, working conditions, dealing with some of the changes, and classroom teaching. The cause of the increase in mental health issues continues to be at the forefront of educators' concerns. There is a need for continuous research to help identify and understand more avenues to assist teachers with mental health concerns. Ongoing research is required to continue to explore different variables that are associated with teachers feeling stress and anxiety and develop strategies that can be quickly implemented to support teachers' mental health needs.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe their experiences teaching during COVID-19?

2. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe the challenges they faced while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

3. How do special education teachers describe the best approaches or teaching methods utilized while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

4. How do special education teachers describe the level of change in their stress level, anxiety, or depression while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

Definitions

1.   Anxiety- According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013) anxiety shares features that are related to disturbances in a person's behavior and there is fear which affects the person's emotions.

2.   Stress- According to Haaren-Mack et Al. (2020, p. 280), "stress is defined as a particular transaction between the person and the environment, appraised or evaluated by the person as being taxing or exceeding his or her resources."

3.   Depression- A mood disorder that can cause a loss of interest in activities that a person once enjoyed engaging in daily.

4.   Burnout- Burnout is associated with disengagement, exhaustion, and depersonalization, which leaves teachers emotionally unavailable to connect with students, negatively impacts student–teacher relationships, and is correlated with lower levels of self-efficacy (Fox et., 2020, p. 235).

5.   Pandemic- An epidemic that spreads globally (Grennan, 2019).

6.   COVID-19- WHO described COVID-19 as an infectious disease that was the most recently discovered coronavirus to infect individuals' respiratory systems (Aboagye et al., 2020).

Summary

The profession of teaching is important because it allows the teacher to make a significant difference in the lives of children. The teacher has the opportunity to become a role model, assist students with developing strong minds, and offer guidance toward their future. When COVID-19 came about the expectations became even more important; however, there were more challenges to educating students. Daniel (2020) acknowledged that COVID-19 is one

of the greatest challenges that the educational institutions system has ever faced when the government ordered face-to-face instruction to be discontinued. The largest online learning experience in history began in the spring of 2020 when 90 percent of schools worldwide closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic (An et al., 2021). This pandemic disrupted the lives of teachers, students, parents, and the community in a variety of ways. The closure of schools required students and teachers to switch overnight from face-to-face learning to online teaching and virtual education. There was very little time for preparations to take place for staff, students, or parents.

The teaching profession is a rewarding occupation; however, it can also be a stressful occupation. Recently teachers are feeling anxiety and depression more now than they have in the past. The study by Stapleton et al. (2020) discussed how teachers have reported a higher level of work-related stress and symptoms of psychological health problems than other occupations. Digging deeper into this topic would be beneficial to the institution of education no matter the level of education being taught. Unfortunately, there continue to be some unanswered questions regarding the stress level of educators. There is a need for continuous research to help identify and understand more avenues to assist teachers with mental health concerns. Ongoing research would be required to continue to explore different variables that are associated with special education teachers feeling stress and anxiety and learn what strategies can be quickly implemented to support teachers' mental health needs.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Within this chapter, I will review the literature of how special education teachers were impacted by teaching students remotely during COVID-19 when New Jersey schools were mandated to instruct students remotely. I analyzed the literature relating to special education teachers, stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the implications of the literature that has been reviewed for the research questions framed in Chapter 1.

Theoretical Framework

COVID-19 has had an impact on a global level and among the major sectors of the world that were impacted was the institution of education. COVID-19 is a health crisis that forced policy makers within governments to find a way to continue the education of students. The institution of education has been directly affected, and it caused school districts to scramble to find a way to educate students within a matter of days. The teachers were required to change their ways of teaching via face-to-face learning, and many in this group of professionals were not prepared. Because of the impact COVID-19 had on teachers, my phenomenological study involves, "the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75) and how it has affected the special education teachers working in New Jersey who were teaching remotely during the pandemic.

I decided to use the phenomenological approach for this study and chose a transcendental investigative approach. The transcendental means looking at the phenomenon with an open mind and fresh eyes and gathering the information of the experiences from the participants. The phenomenological approach is a shared experience based on first-hand accounts that provides an

understanding of the phenomenon. This approach originated based on science and education disciplines. There are two types of phenomenon approaches: hermeneutic phenomenology; and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology. These approaches are presented in written form and the researcher may experience some challenges. The occasional challenges are caused by the selection of participants with shared knowledge and the structured requirements of this approach.

The conceptual framework that guided this study was Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The beginning ideas of this theory were researched, developed, and published by Nancy Schlossberg in 1981. The Schlossberg's Transition Theory is an event that results in a change of relationships, routines, assumptions, or roles. This framework allows the researcher to see the moving parts such as moving in, through, and out of the COVID-19 pandemic. When reviewing how the pandemic affected the relationships, routines, and roles of teachers it was easy to understand how the theory related directly to this situation. The Transition Theory has three types of transitions that play a key role in defining the individual that is experiencing the transitions. The categories that are within the transition are anticipated transition, unanticipated transition, and nonevents. This event was not anticipated by anyone. Although COVID-19 was first talked about in December of 2019, the seriousness of the disease became known in the spring of 2020. Once the pandemic came to the forefront, finding a way to educate students remotely moved rather quickly. The government requested immediate lockdown and quarantine orders giving school districts only a matter of days to prepare for remote learning.

The transition that correlates with this study is the unanticipated transition. This transition is when an event is not predictable or scheduled—such as the pandemic and the mandatory closing of schools in which teachers were forced to educate students remotely. Schlossberg's

theory is ideal for this study because it is defined by individual experience. According to Powers (2010), it recognizes how the individual move in, through, and out of a situation. The following four areas are covered in each category: situation, support, self, and strategies. The situation, support, self, and strategies are also referred to as the 4S The situation identifies the trigger or what brought about the transition. It discusses the timing of the transition and whether it is considered on time or off time when the transition occurs. The next "S" is self. It takes into consideration the demographic and personal characteristics of the individual viewer. The views are impacted by their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, their gender, age, and stage of life. Social support relates to intimate relationships, family units, network of friends, institutions, and communities, which are tied directly to this particular study. Last in the set of factors is strategies. This is how the individual learns to modify the situation, how the problem is controlled, and how the stress is managed in the aftermath.

Because of the aforementioned factors, this is relevant as to why this theory holds a direct correlation with the study because the study can describe the experiences of special education teachers before remote learning, moving through remote learning, and moving out of remote learning after the mandate was lifted and schools returned to in-person learning.

This phenomenon is a shared experience that was based on first-hand accounts and provides an understanding of the phenomenon, in which the teachers working in New Jersey described their experiences of educating students remotely when the pandemic was at its highest peak. Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed how there are two types of phenomenon approaches —hermeneutic phenomenology; and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology. Phenomenon is one of the most popular methodologies because the literature is from scholars in different fields, and it has a philosophical view.

I also considered another framework by Moustakas. Moustaka's data collection approach implements analysis procedures and guidelines for the descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This philosophical component also includes the contributions of Edmund Husserl, Martin Hidegger, and Maurice Meleau-Ponty. Although I considered this framework, the Transition Theory was more suitable for this study.

The philosophical assumptions and interpretive framework that led me to choose a methodological approach. Based on relevant previous work with this assumption, I chose this method to help bring insight to this research study. Having the ability to use methodology "holds that a qualitative researcher conceptualizes the research process in a certain way" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 325). The researchers' questions rely on the insight of the participants, who talk about their views within the context. The researcher then develops the ideas within the study based on the participants' responses. Methodology, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), will give the researcher the ability to revise questions and shape the researcher's experience when collecting and analyzing the data. The methods that I used were surveys, questionnaires, and interviews (face-to-face, by telephone, or virtually). This framework allowed me to reach teachers throughout the school district to inquire into their insight and knowledge about their firsthand experiences. This theory allowed me to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study to gain insight into how educators taught students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. I focused on this theory because it allowed the participants to report their shared experiences of teaching students remotely.

Related Literature

Anxiety, Depression and Teaching Remotely

A teacher is an individual who instructs or educates others and helps or guides others through their learning process. Making a connection with students on a basic level is what teaching is really about for most students and teachers (Glessner, 2020). But when it comes to a special education teacher, there is even more of a connection with the students. Their needs can vary depending on the severity of their disability. A special education teacher is more aware of how to meet their specific individualized special needs. These teachers specialize in instructing students with disabilities and can meet their educational needs according to their Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Because of students having special needs, teaching special needs students has become a more stressful profession for teachers because the teachers must figure out alternative routes to teach their special needs students remotely. Many students look to their teachers as the rational stronghold (Glessner, 2020) which creates a great sense of belonging. Identifying some of the most prevalent reasons that teachers are becoming depressed and feeling anxiety is paramount. Special education teachers were forced to transition from face-to-face interactions to learning how to create PDF documents from workbook pages and learning to upload the documents to a platform they were not accustomed to (Glessner, 2020).

The experience that teachers were having did not allow the students to have well-rounded lessons. According to Feng and Sass (2013), nearly 14 percent of students who are enrolled in a public education setting have a disability and are receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Another study by Bendeck (2022) also determined students with disabilities in a public-school setting make up approximately 14percent of the population. Bendeck's (2022) discussed how teachers struggled to educate their students and had difficulties

adjusting to new teaching modalities in addition to their workload being increased while teaching remotely. Reviewing the American Psychiatric Association (2013) anxiety description shares features that are related to disturbances in a person's behavior such as fear, which affects the person's emotions. Teachers feel anxiety often caused by worrying about the future. Implementing strategies to help manage teacher anxiety would help them feel more grounded and relaxed (Eulberg, 2023).

When depression sets in, the individual is negatively affected by the way they feel, how they act, and how well they can cope daily. Depression is a mood disorder that can cause a loss of interest in activities that a person once enjoyed engaging in daily. Recognizing and understanding the correlation among the profession of teaching, depression, and anxiety is pertinent. Is there a truly significant difference between special education teachers instructing remotely and depression and anxiety? According to a peer-reviewed article by Sparks (2022), remote teachers displayed more symptoms of depression than their counterparts who were teaching in-person.

Most recently, teachers have identified stress and anxiety caused by teaching through COVID-19. Stapleton observed how there is a direct association between anxiety, stress, and depressive disorder (Stapleton et al., 2020). Teachers started to feel anxiety because of the high demand of having to learn new strategies that were truly not attainable to teach students with disabilities. The results of a study by Toquero (2021) noted how teachers experienced difficulties finding new virtual strategies that were appropriate and in alignment with the curriculum for students with disabilities. Attempting to find new strategies created some anxiety for some special education teachers and approximately one in four of teachers in Germany experienced severe to extremely severe stress and anxiety (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021) caused by

teaching remotely. Stapleton et al., (2020) recognized in their research that, unfortunately, schoolteachers are one of the top three professions that reported mental stressors. Teachers have dealt with high-stress situations and reported symptoms of anxiety. A study by Sparks (2022) showed that teachers under 30 years of age were more likely to display anxiety and depression then those teachers who were over 50 years of age.

Ibrahim et al. (2021) showed in their research that mental health has become an issue in many countries, not just in the United States. Special education teachers in New Jersey were impacted by COVID-19 and it has affected the teaching profession severely. In China, there was also a pattern where 9.1 percent of their teachers reported stress symptoms and required psychological assistance during this time of remote teaching (Zhou & Yao, 2020). Because special education students are taught daily no matter the demographic area, grade level, or subject area, special education teachers have developed anxiety and depression within the last few years at a rapid pace. Teaching during COVID-19 has affected teachers whether teaching in person or virtually. According to Silva et al. (2021), teachers were not prepared for online teaching in any capacity. When the world mandated school closing, teachers were feeling unprepared to teach remotely and it triggered anxiety (Eulberg, 2023). Teachers were not able to plan; they were only given a matter of days to learn a new platform for teaching their students.

At the onset of the pandemic, teachers did not have the appropriate or adequate training to teach students virtually and this created yet another level of anxiety. This was especially challenging with the seasoned or older population of teachers who are not tech-savvy. According to Glessner (2020) although technology was available for teachers, not all teachers were versed in utilizing technology effectively. This specific group of teachers found it more stressful to learn to use a new method in addition to maintaining a good relationship with their students and

families (Rice, 2022). Because of the stress levels perceived before implementing remote teaching, it would have been beneficial for some training to be put into place to assist teachers. Similarly, Pozo-Rico et al. (2020) stated that the effectiveness of such training is to provide teachers with useful strategies and resources and facilitate the effective transfer of these skills to the classroom to buffer against teacher stress in everyday school life, as the program developed in the present study. If a training program was put into place, perhaps it would have aided teachers in learning to cope with stress, how to prevent being burned out, and how emotional intelligence (EI) is implemented in the classroom. It could also have given strategies for how to improve information and technology (ICT). During remote learning, teachers were not able to use the traditional strategies for in-person learning. Teachers were forced to learn new virtual instruction methods, pedagogy, and platforms (Pressley, 2021). Many teachers did not have experience utilizing technology in this manner and were not accustomed to teaching students in this type of environment—it became overwhelming. As teachers returned to in-person teaching, they faced new challenges in addition to even more anxieties and stressors. While the teacher was educating students remotely, they faced a lot of challenges such as how to communicate with students who perhaps were nonverbal, students who had attention difficulties, or students who were not able to log on successfully because of their disabilities. This created more barriers to overcome for all stakeholders involved in the education of students.

Stress and Teaching Remotely

Another concern that has been brought to the forefront during the pandemic within the teaching profession is to identify what is causing stress during remote learning. When teachers started to feel stressed, they seemed to have lost some of their love for their profession. For example, when teachers experienced stress, their job satisfaction feelings were reduced (Richards

et al., 2018). One of the characteristics of stress, according to Haaren-Mack et al. (2020) is a particular transaction between the person and the environment, appraised or evaluated by the person as being taxing or exceeding his or her resources. Another researcher has determined that high levels of stress have been identified in the teaching profession compared to the general population (Stapleton et al., 2020). Stress is when depression sets in; the individual is negatively affected by the way they feel, how they act, and how they can cope daily. Analyzing the study conducted by Chan et al. (2021) teachers reported feeling emotional exhaustion and high levels of task stress and job ambiguity.

Some have attributed stress to the lack of support that was provided to staff. The early days of educating students remotely were when most teachers experienced a higher-than-normal level of stress—within the first few months of school closures caused by COVID-19 (Chan et al., 2021). Reviewing the information by Bradley (2007), I found that there was a direct relationship between the lack of social support and the amount of strain that was acknowledged. This was prevalent, especially among inexperienced teachers. If offered, teachers would openly welcome more support because of feeling overwhelmed often and the extra support would allow them the opportunity to feel less pressure and tension. Ibrahim et al. (2021) found that teachers who have a low amount of social support will have an increased amount of psychological distress. Identifying what social support teachers seem to lack the most would help reduce the amount of stress, anxiety, and burnout that has been associated with teaching.

There is a history of burnout and turnover within the teaching profession, and COVID-19 and remote teaching compounded it even more. Burnout syndrome refers to "this chronification of work-related stress, manifesting as a long-lasting response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors at work" (Gomez et al., 2022, p. 2). A teacher's burnout can seriously

impact their effectiveness in teaching their student, their level of motivation, and their ability to give their students support. "Previous research found teacher burnout and shortages affected student motivation and student academic success" (Pressley, 2021, p. 325). Because of the burnout rate in conjunction with COVID-19, should teachers health and well-being be taken more seriously than prior to the pandemic? Teachers were not feeling appreciated for the additional work and longer days that were occurring, thus leading to additional feelings of burnout. This affected their health. Burnout of teachers can also affect their health and well-being and cause depression (Gomez et al., 2022). During COVID-19 teachers had to transform their classrooms overnight to virtual settings with little to no support or preparation. The sudden increase of demands led to a sudden increase of stress for teachers (Fox & Walter, 2022). Therefore, teachers continue to be stressed and the demands continue to come within their job responsibilities. Is this a fair practice for educators?

It is very easy to feel burned out and stressed if you are not taking care of yourself mentally, physically, and emotionally. In a study conducted by Aten and Boan (2016), they identified how to recognize and prevent burnout, in addition to strategies for self-care. The self-care portion these researchers provided is helpful. It gives great examples of how to balance life activities, keep an optimistic perspective, and plan well, which are ideal for teachers. The strategies that I noted were to improve self-care. It is important to pass along to others but also to apply it to oneself, especially after the pandemic.

Prior to COVID-19 there was a significant number of teachers in the United States that experienced psychological distress, burnout, and stress. The teaching profession has been characterized as stressful and prone to burnout (Andrew et al., 2018). Teachers were stressed and struggling to meet the needs of the students as they were teaching. Because of the increase of

stress and burnout there was concern about teachers' well-being, and some teachers chose to leave the teaching profession because of an increase in demands. Avoiding burnout will allow the teachers to continue to provide a high level of education to the students who rely on their teachers to educate them properly. Unfortunately, if the teachers experience burnout, then the education of the students cannot be rendered accurately and effectively to those students who will not have the proper education they deserve. Bottiani et al. (2019) stated there is high stress and burnout with teachers who are working in low-income school districts where the students are disproportionate and face other concerns as well. The comparison is in regards to a low-income school district and a well-off school district where there are more resources and opportunities available for students and staff.

Avoiding burnout will allow the professional to continue to provide a high level of services to individuals who rely heavily on services. A recent comprehensive review indicates that 21–67 percent of helping professionals experience high levels of burnout and warns that burnout may not only be widespread among helping professionals but continue to spread (Morse et al., 2012). Within the educational field there is a larger number of women than men, which means more women than men are affected. Silva et al. (2021) showed that women recorded a higher rate of anxiety when compared to their counterparts. In the profession of teaching, the percentage of women who are teachers is much higher than men. This study also broke down the difference in who works in schools (K–12th grade) and compared that to teachers working in universities or colleges. Identifying a variety of methods to help alleviate and reduce the number of teachers who have been diagnosed with depression or anxiety needs to be investigated continuously.

During the pandemic there was a concern about the lack of social support between tenured teachers and new-start teachers. Many of the new teachers were depending on the older teachers for support; however, the older teachers were not computer savvy and could not offer additional support to their colleagues. All teachers were looking for additional support from administration, colleagues, or the community, not just special education teachers. There were a variety of supports that would have assisted teachers in all capacities, and Huk et al. (2019) determined that a variation of support from such sources as administration, colleagues, students' parents, and the teachers' family or friends would have positively affected their outlook on teaching. Each additional source of support that could have been implemented could have impacted the effects of burnout differently. If the administration would find resourceful ways to increase social support, it would encourage teachers to keep pushing and have a positive impact on this experience of teaching remotely. Additional support would also enhance the overall well-being of the teachers and reduce their stress levels. There are a variety of supports that teachers could receive that would positively increase their mental health. Teachers could have also received additional support from their students and community members as well who were also trying to find a way to maintain the stability of teaching effectively during COVID-19 (Huk et al., 2019). Any assistance during this pandemic was welcomed by most. Ibrahim et al. (2021) believed an increase in strong support can reduce stress for teachers as well as help improve their overall physical and psychological well-being. Teachers were looking for more engagement, support, and assistance from administrators such as their principals (Richard et al., 2018). It was also discovered that teachers with low support were more likely to suffer from a psychological illness. According to Ibrahim et al. (2021), psychological well-being or mental health among teachers has become an increasing issue in many countries. Therefore, overall, this is a universal

concern for the world, and finding a way to orchestrate better strategies to reduce this concern is beneficial. Creating a method to decrease the number of teachers who could suffer from mental stressors would allow teachers to give more of themselves to their students.

Teachers with tenure usually need a minimum of support, however, that is not the case with new-start teachers. When looking at the most recently hired teachers, Bradley (2007) found there was a weak relationship between social support and job strain, especially for inexperienced teachers. Many teachers were looking for a more nurturing environment to develop a positive, supportive relationship with all the stakeholders involved in the lives of the students. The lack of support from direct supervisors and administration has impacted the teaching profession; therefore, more pressure is put on tenured teachers to support new-start teachers, which adds additional stress and strain to their job. Is this a fair practice?

The pressure of being a teacher is difficult at times, because of the many roles a teacher plays in their students' lives. Besides teaching, there are other roles such as counselor, parenting, or just being a listening ear for students. Teachers wear many hats, and according to McCarthy et al. (2022), COVID-19 has made matters more difficult for teachers by adding additional demands on them, which has increased their stress levels. Teachers are now expected to assist with social-emotional learning (SEL). Reviewing the information that Jagers et al. (2021) presented discussing SEL and the process through which all students and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, they are learning how to establish, develop, and maintain supportive relationships. Teachers are also learning to make more informative, responsible, and caring decisions when it comes to their students. Because of the untimeliness of COVID-19, (Kim & Asbury, 2020) many changes have been

necessary in society, including those in education that are likely to be cognitively and emotionally taxing for teachers. The constraint that teachers endure because of the pressure of fostering their student's social and emotional well-being can be immense which adds additional stress to their day. Stapleton et al. (2020) noted that teachers need to be responsible for fostering students' emotional well-being; however, this responsibility adds additional pressure to the strain already felt. Teachers are not skilled in this area of SEL and may not feel comfortable trying to provide support to the students because of their lack of experience in this area. According to Wong (2020), teachers have the opportunity to teach self-regulation skills, but it can be challenging. Without the skill set learning the SEL curriculum is one option, but other everyday strategies can assist in managing the process. One strategy that can be implemented at the start of each class (whether in-person or online) is a check-in that helps students learn to recognize their mental and emotional states and share strategies that are helping classmates cope. Other strategies could include giving students and teachers adequate breaks from the computer, creating breakout classrooms for when students become overwhelmed or simply contacting their guidance counselor who is adequately trained in this area.

Unfortunately, teachers have recognized there is a high demand for not only teaching students their academics but also ensuring their SEL is being addressed daily during this pandemic. The role for teachers was changing and some were not prepared for additional roles besides teaching. According to Richards et al. (2018), teachers felt stressed because of role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Is this a fair practice for teachers? It is important to address these additional roles because teachers believe this unsaid expectation has caused stress and hinders the students' learning and the teacher's ability to effectively teach remotely. The ongoing argument has been, did this practice become a part of a teacher's job description when

they were hired as a teacher? This is just another example of additional demands on a teacher that has added additional, unforeseen stress and pressure because of COVID-19. Regrettably, the "shift to remote teaching and learning has meant a complete re-thinking of the delivery of early years programs, whereby teachers needed to examine how they would meet the four conditions for learning in a remote context" (Timmons et al., 2021, p. 888). The four conditions that Timmons et al. (2021) refer to are belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression. These are considered four foundational conditions for students learning, and these conditions have been directly affected during remote learning.

Men's and Women's Stress Levels

When reviewing the literature, understanding the ratio of men to women teachers is impactful because of the ratio of women to men within the teaching profession. The study by Silva et al. (2021) revealed that women recorded a higher rate of anxiety when compared to their counterparts. In the profession of teaching, the rate of women who are teachers is much higher than men. During the pandemic anxiety among teachers found 13.67 percent of the women reported being more anxious than men, especially among the older women teachers (Li et al., 2020). In the study conducted by Mearns and Cain (2002), their participants were made up of 86 primary and secondary teachers—65 of them were females and 21 were males. Sparks (2023) noted how women teachers report higher symptoms of mental health problems than their male peers. The career path of teaching is one of the leading professions attributed to women (Inandi et al., 2017). This study by Inandi et al. (2017) also broke down the differences among educators in schools (K–12th grade) and compared them to teachers working in universities or colleges.

Based on some of the research conducted, studies have shown that the percentage of women outnumbers the number of men. According to Inandi et al. (2017, p. 542) "it appeals to

women in that teaching is identified with motherhood roles, it has flexible working hours, weekend and summer holidays, which is suitable for social gender roles. For that reason, women face no obstacles in the teaching profession." This directly correlates to the higher number of women reporting they are more stressed and depressed than their male counterparts. Hales et al. (2018) collected data by conducting a survey consisting of 98 teachers, in which 84 percent of the teachers were female and 16 percent were male. Women in the field of teaching have always outnumbered men, which affects the percentage of the population that reports their mental health status. Another study conducted by Stapleton et al. (2020) involved 166 teachers, of whom 147 (88.6%) participants were females and 18 (10.8%) were males, continued to show the imbalance among the teachers. It also shows why there is a larger percentage of women who report feeling depression or anxiety or both. Men tend to avoid expressing their feelings and believe it could hinder their chances of being promoted. Although women teachers outnumber men, studies have shown that women teachers are not promoted as quickly as men. Although there are no restrictions on women from being teachers, they, unfortunately, feel there are barriers for them when compared to men when it comes to professional promotion and development in the teaching profession (Inandi et al., 2017).

Demographics and Teaching Remotely

There are key demographic variables that are important in the realm of teaching. The level of education that a teacher has obtained can also play an important role. According to Ibrahim et al. (2021), there have been several notable factors that have contributed to stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers. Demographics such as age, level of education, teaching experience, inadequate salaries, higher qualifications, higher workload, and psychological job demands have all been viewed as contributing factors. Overall, a teacher's level of education is a

minimum of a bachelor's level, however, the level can surpass a master's degree or higher. Higher qualifications are now recommended and some are even required in the teaching profession, which represents a change over the years. Teachers used to be required to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree–now many teachers are strongly encouraged to obtain their master's degree or certification in specific educational subject areas. Increasing the qualifications places additional stress on teachers who may not want to obtain a higher degree but may need to conform to keep their career in teaching. The study conducted by Mearns and Cain (2002) discovered that 20 percent of new teachers will give up their teaching job during their first few years of teaching. Other studies suggest teachers are more susceptible to work-related stressors and psychological distress compared to other occupations (Singleton et al., 2020). Because of the levels of stressors, according to Allen et al. (2020), one in five head teachers contributed that their experience during COVID-19 made it more likely that they would discontinue their teaching profession compared to one in ten classroom teachers. Teachers who have tenure and years of teaching experience have no interest or desire for additional education.

Regrettably, part of the decision not to continue their teaching careers had a lot to do with technology, teaching remotely, or distance learning. There was great concern about the immediate and sudden changes in delivery and how there was insufficient training with remote teaching methodologies. Teachers were inexperienced, which created more stress and an increase in their workload (Chan et al., 2021). Teachers were not accustomed to remote learning. Zilka (2021) defined remote learning as a digital teaching system that involves learners and teachers separated from each other by physical distance. Both teachers and students were accustomed to in-person learning with the structure of a set building. For example, Winter et al. (2021) determined that teaching online poses challenges for teachers trained primarily to work face-to-

face. Teaching within the classroom had many advantages, including physical contact and the ability to walk around to help students with hands-on lessons. When special education students need modifications and accommodations, being able to assist within the classroom hands on is important. When a teacher is teaching remotely, they have to deliver the material, maintain the students' focus, keep their attention towards a computer, and make sure the lesson is being taught according to the standards of their school district. This is more challenging because there are so many distractions going on and the teacher has to pull everyone's attention together through a computer.

Teachers are accustomed to teaching their students face to face; however, when COVID-19 hit the world, challenges arose because teachers were not accustomed to teaching virtually. There was very little time for preparation about how virtual learning was going to take place. This was not only a concern for the general education student population, but also how special education students were going to engage with virtual learning. Virtual learning for students with disabilities, according to Rice (2022), meant the students had to understand how to log onto the internet, access instructional platforms, learn to be social from a distance, and participate in an educational setting by video conferencing with their teachers. The virtual learning platform and training tools were not an option, therefore learning how implement this platform for special education students had to be figured out and implemented. This was a notable challenge for special needs students, their teachers, and their parents. Prior to teaching students their academics, teachers had to teach the students the basic computer knowledge for the new platform they were being taught. Teachers had to use the resource although some technology was lacking. The lack of technology in the classroom could mean some students initially had neither computers nor Wi-Fi. This was a challenging factor because students were

home, and teachers were limited in how they could intervene. When teachers were teaching in

person, there was the opportunity to help their students because the contact was different.

Technologies for Teaching Remotely

Teachers had to come to terms with a new method of teaching students remotely and not

within the four walls they were accustomed to. When teachers found out their schools were

mandated to teach virtually, they realized the limits around time, resources, support, and

technology had necessitated putting everything into place in such a short amount of time.

Teachers suddenly had to become dependent on digital tools for teaching students, as well as

learn to videoconference and communicate with parents via social media, and this became a

burden for some teachers. Some teachers found this process to be negative and stressful

(Klapproth et al., 2020). There was trial and error for everyone because this was such an

unprecedented moment in the field of education. Teachers were forced to come to terms with

being unprepared and to handle multiple challenges they were facing with virtual instruction. For

example, the new method of teaching students required adaptability to all new technologies and

some of the older populations of teachers were not interested (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021).

Some teachers felt unprepared and wanted some professional development to assist with the new

platform for teaching. The new platform involved virtual learning; however, setting up the

curriculum virtually was another challenge for those teachers who were not technologically

inclined. Teachers were expected to transition from paper and pencil learning to instructing every

lesson remotely. Teachers had not been instructed on remote teaching or how to implement

instruction, nor did they have experience in how to set up a virtual classroom. According to

Richards et al., (2018), teachers would have felt more empowered and supported if they were

offered professional development and some social opportunities to enhance their virtual teaching experience.

Adjusting to virtual learning was easier for some than others. The younger teachers with less teaching experience had fewer difficulties understanding and implementing technology whereas the older teachers were less interested in learning a newer platform (Song & Chen, 2019). The difficulties and barriers that teachers encountered with technology teaching virtually during COVID-19 were enormous. The recent study by Besser et al. (2020) pointed out how during the lockdown, teachers suffered from stress because they had, in record time, to learn to provide online classes to educate their students. Most teachers experienced technical barriers, but the majority of them felt able to cope functionally with the stress (Klapproth et al., 2020). Teachers immediately had to learn how to integrate technology, which resulted in some teachers feeling stressed. Teachers felt there was a lack of support, and neither the teachers nor the parents were fully prepared for remote learning. Teachers experienced medium to high levels of stress teaching students during this timeframe and had to learn how to implement coping strategies. This was not an easy transition for most seasoned teachers because of their lack of skills with and knowledge of technology. Older teachers may have felt additional stress and strain in comparison to their younger counterparts who may not have been teaching as long. Older teachers were not looking to increase their knowledge in the technology field. When looking at the effects of job stressors, according to Bradley (2007), the strain is more likely to vary depending on the duration of the teacher's employment. Teachers' skill level and confidence level in utilizing technology had to increase quickly to meet the needs of their students. Most teachers utilized technology as an enhancer for learning as opposed to having technology being the primary focus point of learning.

Post Pandemic Teaching

Moving in, moving through, and moving out of the pandemic appears to be a good example of Transition Theory. Many were concerned about what the return of educating students in person would look like. During remote learning there was a huge disconnect between what was once in-person learning and virtual learning. The purpose of an educational institution is educating students; however, there were so many other underlying issues that concerned all the stakeholders. School districts had to find resources to successfully rebuild their learning environments that could have been lost during virtual learning. This was an immediate concern of the government, the school system, parents, teachers, and students. All the stakeholders involved had no idea of how to prevent the continuous spread of COVID-19. Things each school district had to take into consideration were social distancing, masking, and setting up the classrooms to ensure the safety of everyone. Student reliance on transportation to get to school daily, students eating lunch in the cafeteria, or students walking down the hallway to change classes had to be addressed. Pre-pandemic, pandemic instruction, and postpandemic instruction all have different appearances, and the way teachers were able to navigate their way through remote instruction is to be commended because of the stress level encountered through all phases. Eulberg (2023) discussed how it is not a secret how incredibly stressful teaching had been before the pandemic and confirmed teacher anxiety was higher than most other professions in a 2017 survey. Prior to the pandemic, the profession of teaching was considered a stressful and demanding job–moving through the pandemic, this profession became even more stressful and demanding. According to Sparks (2023), prior to the pandemic studies revealed that teachers reported higher stress in their field than those in other professions. Based on previous studies this

confirmed how stressful this profession was before the pandemic. Unfortunately, the pandemic did not help this profession flourish any more easily.

When the time had come for the reopening of schools there were obvious concerns for everyone involved. Teachers were nervous about returning to school as if it was their first day teaching students. Finding a way to ease the teachers back into a routine could be challenging as there was so much to be concerned about. There were many health concerns to take into consideration in addition to ensuring students' education would have limited interruptions. Face-to-face learning would look different for everyone after being educated remotely for over a year. There was a concern about how the school systems would be in a better position to put the relevant support structures into place that would be needed for staff and students to be successful (Dalton et al., 2020). Making sure the teachers were emotionally prepared for reopening became a challenge for the school system, the educational community, and for society in general (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). The teachers were trying to prepare to accept students; however, the teachers were looking for support for themselves as well. Because of the uncertainty of re-opening, teachers continued to feel stress and anxiety. Some teachers noted they were feeling stressed about the possibility of their students becoming infected at school and that distracted their focus away from educating the students (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). If the focus is on the possibility of infecting others, then the students will not focus as much on their education. Because of the possibility of others being infected, there was a high percentage of teachers who reported they suffered from symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression when schools were scheduled for reopening (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Because of many of the challenges that were presented through remote learning, teachers wanted the schools to be re-opened, however they wanted to be sure everyone was safe.

Summary

There has been an enormous amount of research on COVID-19 and the impact it has had on society. Over the past few decades, there has been considerable interest in teacher stress as an indicator of subjective well-being (Fox & Walter, 2020). Teachers in the United States experience psychological distress, stress, and burnout. Understanding and targeting negative indicators will help shed some light on how to increase teachers' well-being and implementing preventative measure to help teachers from suffering from stress, burnout and anxiety will improve teacher's mental health. Regrettably, there were added stressors during COVID-19 that compounded and exacerbated burnout, stress, anxiety, and the turnover rate for teachers. Many factors contributed to teachers being stressed and feeling burned out during this unprecedented time in history.

Although many teachers felt the negative effects of COVID-19, some teachers exhibited incredible resilience and had good workplace experiences. The impact COVID-19 had on special education teachers should be taken into consideration in addition to the mental health and well-being of all teachers worldwide. Throughout the literature there were some factors identified. Haaren-Mack et al. (2020) identified some of the causes of stress as the workload, target, and performance in the classrooms; the relationships with the students and with their colleagues; working conditions; dealing with some of the changes; and classroom teaching. Allowing teachers to voice and describe their concerns was beneficial. Gomez-Dominguez et al. (2022) described how teachers were forced to adapt their teachers' skills to meet the needs of the students learning remotely. The workload changed and they had to learn new teaching methodologies, and many felt there was a lack of resources available when remote learning was suddenly implemented. As the workload increased over time, so did the increase in burnout

symptoms. Nearly 60 percent of teachers survived reported they were burned out when compared to 44 percent of other worker's in different professions (Sparks, 2022).

What has already been discovered about this topic confirms the importance of why teachers are feeling overwhelmed. Based on the previous studies and literature reviewed, there is evidence that teachers are feeling anxiety and suffering from depression caused by a variety of factors directly related to the profession of teaching. Factors that have directly contributed to anxiety and depression include the increased demands that have been required of teachers such as increase in higher education, the lack of support, and understanding the social and emotional needs of the students. The evidence from the literature review also echoed how there continues to be a need for further research in this area because of the high incidence of burnout and distress. Teaching is one of the most important professions in our society and teachers will continue to have additional pressure because of the negative impact and that has been shown by the prior research of many scholars. It would be helpful for future researchers to investigate why there continues to be a gap in the lack of social support. Mearns and Cain (2002) suggest how, it is important to explore what characteristics of some teachers may protect them from the ravages of job stress, while other teachers remain vulnerable and suffer negative consequences. How can the institution of education increase the climate and culture of their community to make this profession more suitable for teachers? Are enough resources available for teachers? How can administration create more of a balance and reduce the number of demands on teachers so that it does not result in mental health concerns? Also, if women teachers outnumber men, why are men more likely to be promoted to administrative positions than women? Being able to clearly understand why teachers are more susceptible to stress compared to other professions will help improve the profession overall and perhaps more people would want to become a part of this

profession. Overall, what needs to be found is the leading factor that causes teachers to become stressed and overwhelmed. To develop the ability to close that gap justifies the time that needs to be invested into the continuation of further research into this subject.

The topic of depression and anxiety as it relates to the teaching profession demands immediate attention so that strategies can be put into place to reduce the number of teachers who develop mental health concerns and more. Teachers are feeling overwhelmed and have identified a variety of stressors they encounter within their profession. In the case of COVID-19, teachers are attempting to find a way to reduce their stress and anxiety to be effective teachers. Is there a way to relieve teachers of additional stress? Why is so much stress put on teachers that they feel overwhelmed and are suffering from anxiety and depression? Identifying a variety of methods to help alleviate and reduce the number of teachers who have been diagnosed with depression or anxiety needs ongoing research. Because of unanswered questions, further research in this area is still needed to reduce stress and anxiety levels among teachers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

My research is a phenomenological qualitative study to explore special education teachers' experiences in New Jersey teaching remotely during COVID-19. New Jersey was state mandated to implement remote learning during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. The rationale for this study was to gain insight into how stress, anxiety, or burnout impacted teachers during COVID-19 and how it has affected the teaching profession within New Jersey. The study involves COVID-19, stress, anxiety, burnout, and how teachers dealt with educating students remotely during the pandemic. I had the opportunity to examine the direct impact COVID-19 had on educators who were teaching students remotely within the state of New Jersey.

Design

This study is a phenomenological qualitative study. The researcher made the determination, based on Creswell and Poth (2018), that the most appropriate approach for this study was the phenomenological approach. This approach was appropriate because it focused on the shared experiences of the participants (teachers) and is based on their viewpoints. The phenomenological approach was a shared experience based on first-hand accounts, and it provided an understanding of the phenomenon. This allowed the researcher to collect data from those who experienced the phenomenon. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), part of the data collection must come from any person who has experienced the phenomenon and can develop a composite description of the experience. The experience that was shared and studied was that of special education teachers who were employed in New Jersey who taught middle school special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was for middle school special education teachers who taught during the period of 2019–2020 or 2020–2021 and were

willing to share their experience of working in the school system in New Jersey. The special education teachers shared whether they experienced stress, anxiety, or burnout during the allotted period. Being able to analyze the shared experience of one or more participants gave the researcher sound data regarding the outcome. The researcher used descriptive data that needed to be interpreted as a part of the process. The researcher utilized systematic methods such as transcribing the data, coding the data, and analyzing the trends and themes within the data. The researcher used a variety of methods to ensure the data was gathered correctly through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions from the survey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the researcher some flexibility about the questions being asked to the participant based on how the participant responds. The research interview questions were designed specifically to be open-ended and broad for this study. The researcher utilized a recorder on audio tape and transcribed the data at a later date. This also allowed the researcher to pay close attention to the participant without any interruptions.

Research Question(s)

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe their experiences teaching during COVID-19?

2. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe the challenges they faced while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

3. How do special education teachers describe the best approaches or teaching methods utilized while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

4. How do special education teachers describe the level of change in their stress levels, anxiety or depression while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

Setting

The study took take place in the state of New Jersey with middle school special education teachers who were actively teaching special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers who participated in this study are certified middle school special education teachers in various school districts. The participants were selected using snowball sampling for this study. Snowballing allowed the researcher to reach a specific population that this study was geared toward. Snowballing is a nonprobability sampling method, and the participants are not random. The participants were recruited and recommended by other working professionals within a variety of different New Jersey school districts.

The researcher used online surveys by utilizing the participants' email system, in addition to conducting interviews. The surveys determined whether the teachers were eligible to participate in the study based on their responses. If the teacher was determined to be eligible, they moved on to the next phase of the study, which was the interview. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or virtually, depending on how comfortable the participants were with meeting face-to-face. Because COVID-19 is an active contagious disease, the participants had the option to be interviewed virtually.

Participants

The criteria for participation in this study are as follows: first, the teacher must have been an employee of a school district and have worked during the pandemic during the 2019–2020 or 2020–2021 school years. The entire state of New Jersey implemented remote learning from March 2020 to June 2020 and September 2020 to June 2021. Second, the teachers must hold a special education certification, which allows them to teach special education students in grades 6 to 8 in any subject matter. Third, the teachers must have taught special education students within

a special education setting during the pandemic. These questions were addressed in the survey (see Appendix C).

The participants for this sample pool study were teachers who were employees of New Jersey. Some of the teachers could possibly be employees within a Title I School District. A Title I school district received additional funding for disadvantaged students from the federal government (Lyons, 2006). The participants were teachers who were employed with the school district and whose contractual workday is 7 hours per day, Monday–Friday. The school hours for teachers may vary according to the school district where they working. Most middle school hours vary; however, the range is from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm for grades 6[t]–8. The participants in this study are both male and female special education teachers who taught grades 6–8 remotely. The special education teachers' ages and ethnicity varied. Educationally, the teachers had a minimum of a bachelor's degree and hold a special education certification within the state of New Jersey. Participants should not have expected to receive a direct benefit or compensation for taking part in this study; it was strictly voluntary. The records for this study will be kept private by the researcher. Research records are stored securely, and only the researcher has access to the records. The methods that were used were surveys, questionnaires, and interviews (face-to-face, telephone, or virtual). This allowed the researcher to reach teachers throughout the school district to inquire about their insight and knowledge of their firsthand experience of teaching special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Procedures

Consistent with most phenomenological research, the researcher was able to collect data based on the personal views, arguments, and statements of the participants. This approach

allowed the researcher to share the viewpoints and experiences of the participants with meaning and depth. Participants in this study had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions, which gave them the ability to tell their shared experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested designing and using an interview protocol or interview guide and using five to seven open-ended questions. Using yes-or-no questions does not allow any expansion of their responses, and it would also limit the data for the researcher. Interviews were conducted with participants. The interview lasted for a minimum of 45–60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Data collection was the result of the interviews with teachers. A questionnaire was completed in addition to the interview by participants.

This study was submitted for approval by the institutional review board (IRB) at Liberty University and the research complies with APA ethical standards. Within the interview, the participant openly shared their level of education, age, gender, ethnicity, and their time frame of working as a special education teacher. The specific time frame they were employed within a school district is vital to the study for accuracy. The participants completed a depression, anxiety stress scale (DASS; Appendix E) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Appendix F).

Once all the data were collected, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the themes were identified. All the data were compiled and interpreted for others to read and review.

The Researcher's Role

I, Yolanda Henderson (the researcher), am currently a school social worker and case manager for 8th-grade special education students at the Middle School of Pleasantville, in Pleasantville, New Jersey. I am currently a full-time employee with the Pleasantville School District. I have been employed with the Pleasantville School district for twenty years. I am not

directly associated with any of the participants of this study. The participants of this study are all middle school special education teachers who were working remotely in New Jersey during the pandemic. The participants in this study are from a variety of school districts and the population varied; however, all the teachers are middle school special education teachers. Some of the school district's employees who participated in the study may also be employees of a Title I school district. As a Title I school district, this district services children in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community. This means there is a large amount of state funding given to a school district to assist the district financially with educating students. I, Yolanda Henderson, grew up in the neighboring school district which was within a 10 miles of Pleasantville. I currently have a BA in sociology, and a Master's in education and am currently enrolled as a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree in community care and counseling, specializing in trauma.

I collected the data by a combination of interviews (face-to-face or virtual) and surveys by teachers who taught remotely within New Jersey. The data were from special education teachers who taught remotely during the 2019–2020 or the 2020–2021 school years. The teachers who participated in this study work in a variety of school districts in New Jersey. The collection of data allowed the researcher to gain information from special education teachers working in a variety of different school districts in different counties; however, all were within New Jersey. The survey criteria specified that the special education teachers must have worked within a New Jersey school district during the pandemic. The teachers were asked to complete the survey questions based on their employment of teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers who participated were composed of male and female teachers of various ages, different ethnicities, and with different levels of education who are employed in New Jersey.

Data Collection

The data collection was through the method of utilizing interviews. The interviews were conducted with the participants who responded appropriately to the surveys that qualified them to be a participant in this study. The researcher ensured the participants understood the purpose of the study and that being a participant was strictly voluntary and there was no monetary compensation. A consent form (Appendix D) was reviewed with the participant outlining the study in its entirety. The participant was given the DASS scale and SWLS scale before conducting the interview. The scales were reviewed and scored by the researcher before conducting interviews. The interviews took approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted individually with special education teachers either in person or virtually. Scheduling the interviews individually helped with maintaining the accuracy of the data collection. This also allowed each participant time to thoroughly address each question without the interruption of others. Analyzing the data allowed the researcher to explore the common themes and identify the commonalities of the data.

Another form of data collection involved researcher reflection or journaling. Journaling, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is a new form of data collection and can be utilized to help document and develop the theory. Journaling allowed the researcher to continuously log and reflect on the research in addition to recording the experiences in their natural form. It also gave the researcher the ability to compile notes, develop ideas, and identify with thoughts and feelings while going through the study.

Interviews

The process of gathering information involved conducting interviews. The interviews were conducted with those participants who responded appropriately to the surveys and were

qualified to be a participant in this study. The researcher ensured the participant understood the

purpose of the study and that being a participant was strictly voluntary and without

compensation. A consent form (Appendix D) was reviewed with the participant outlining the

study in its entirety. The participants were given the DASS and SWLS scales prior to conducting

the interview. The scales were reviewed and scored by the researcher prior to conducting

interviews. The interviews took approximately 45–60 minutes, excluding the icebreaker. The

interviews were conducted individually because the special education teachers were all from

different school districts. Scheduling the interviews individually helped with maintaining

accuracy of the data collection. Analyzing the data allowed the researcher to explore the

common themes and identify the commonalities of the data.

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What qualifications do you have to support special education students?

3. How long have you been teaching special education students?

4. What grade(s) did you teach during the pandemic?

5. How did your teaching strategies change during remote learning?

6. What type of funding does your school district receive to help support the district as a whole?

7. What was your school district plan for handling COVID-19?

8. Did your school district have the resources in place to educate students from home?

9. What was the time frame you were given to prepare for remote learning within your school district?

10. What was the access to technology for students at home (i.e., chromebook or WIFI)? Was it reliable?

11. What other type of platform for teaching have you used in the past?

12. How prepared were you, technology-wise, to educate special education students remotely?

13. How would you describe your strategies to keep students engaged in learning?

14. What was your method to keep the communication open with parents and/or guardians?

15. How well were you mentally prepared to educate students remotely? Please describe.

16. What mental health related concerns would you attribute to teaching students remotely?

17. Identify any additional stressors you have attributed to educating students remotely?

18. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a special education teacher, educating students remotely?

19. How did your administrative team prepare you for remote learning?

20. How would you describe the communication between you and the administration?

21. Did you receive a significant amount of support from the administration?

22. What is your age?

23. What is your gender?

24. What is your ethnicity?

25. What are your certifications?

Document Analysis

I utilized two types of instruments for this study: DASS and SWLS. The DASS is a self-reporting instrument that will give a participant the ability to relate to their emotional states of depression, anxiety, tension, and stress (Moya et al., 2022). Participants also used the SWLS, which has become the most-used measure of life satisfaction worldwide (Arrindell et al., 2022). The SWL is a short 5-scale instrument that will allow the participant to measure the satisfaction of their life. The participants also participated in a survey and interview. Appendix E (DASS) and Appendix F (SWLS) have the example scales. There was a preliminary survey that consisted of 11 questions. Finally, there were 25 interview questions that took approximately 45–60 minutes for the researcher to engage in conversation with the participant. These questions were developed for the participants to share their experiences and for the researcher to gain insight and knowledge of the direct experiences for the research portion of this study.

Data Analysis

This is a phenomenological qualitative study. I selected this approach to be able to collect data from the participants who had a first-hand shared experience of the phenomenon. I analyzed the data based on the participants responses. Analyzing the data according to Creswell and Poth (2018) involves reading through the data, organizing the themes, representing the data, and interpreting the data. The researcher was able to analyze the data based on the interviews conducted by the researcher.

The participants engaged in an interview to provide the data based on their experience of the phenomenon. I conducted and recorded long, in-depth interviews which, according to McCracken (1988), allows the researcher to collect information involving as many as 10 individuals. Within this research there were 10 participants who participated in the interview

process. The importance of the interviews being recorded and transcribed is because the words are segued in which data is found (Miles et al., 2014). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The researcher read through the interview transcripts and identified the commonalities of the data. Plots and graphs were utilized to identify commonalities based on the data. This method allowed the researcher to document all the information from the participants.

Coding was also utilized within this study. Coding allowed the researcher to analyze the data, identify common themes and commonalities, and assign symbolic meaning to collected data (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed how reducing the data into themes by coding allows the researcher to put the data into figures, tables, and a discussion. I also used in vivo coding with this study. In vivo coding is when an exact word or phrase from the interviewee is used to form the names of the codes or the different categories. The names that are used are catchy and immediately draw the attention of the reader (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher found the relationships within the data by organizing the data into codes to remain objective. The data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. After the transcriptions had been completed the researcher read through the data multiple times and coded the narratives. The researcher was able to identify whether experiences were similar or different and developed codes by identifying key phrases or words to develop codes. This then allowed the researcher to identify repetitive patterns that were put into categories, then themes. Some of the themes that were identified were more dominating than others. The researcher continued this process until no new codes could be developed (Saldana & Omasta, 2016). The researcher continued to look for new codes; however, after there were no new codes to develop, the process ceased at that time.

Trustworthiness

I tested the reliability of this study. Action taken for trustworthiness was to ensure I utilized the correct interpretation by addressing and detailing the credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the study based on the research questions. The research questions for the participants were clear and concise to ensure the questions were fully understood. Memoing allowed the researcher to keep track of key concepts that occurred during the study. This helped validate the researcher's data and gave further insight into what took place during the research process. This process helped identify key concepts and reflect on the larger thoughts within the data.

Credibility

According to Holloway and Wheeler (2002), credibility is defined as the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research study's findings. The credibility determined whether the research was from the original participants' interview data and whether the researcher had interpreted the data correctly from the participants' points of view. The researcher ensured the data had provided supporting evidence accurately for the research that had been conducted.

Dependability and Confirmability

I ensured there was dependable consistency within the data so the data could be accurately measured. Conformability, according to Tobin and Begley (2004, p. 392), is "concerned with establishing the data and interpretation of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but are clearly derived from the data." This research was not a replication of any prior research study. To ensure dependability of this study and its authentication I utilized an audit trail. The audit trail is a digital trail that included all the activities that have occurred during the study and validation of the data was accounted for by the researcher. The researchers'

steps were followed from the start of the study through the development stages to reporting the findings. The purpose of implementing the audit trail was to establish confirmability of the study and to help give credibility and accountability to the study.

Transferability

Based on Anney (2014), transferability refers to the degree in which the findings from the research are transferable to other contexts or settings. My study gave rich descriptive data based on the descriptive stories from the participants. Based on the narratives from the participants, they were able to provide solid answers for the research questions in this study.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher kept the participants' identities and their information confidential. The researcher ensured the participants were not identified by their names or the school district where they were employed. The researcher also kept their responses confidential. The participants' information was coded, and pseudonyms were used for their names within the study. The participants gave consent (see Appendix D). The participants were given a consent form that detailed the purpose of the research. This allowed the participant to accept or decline participation in the research. The participants understood that their participation in the research was strictly voluntary. Participants were informed that at any time and at any point, if they chose, they had the option to discontinue their participation. The data collected were protected by using a pseudonym to keep each participant's identity and information confidential throughout the study.

I also used bracketing for this research. Bracketing gave this researcher the ability to disassociate, as well as temporarily remove any personal belief and experiences that could possibility impact or taint the results of the study. Although the researcher is employed by a

school district, the researcher did not allow any biases to spill over into the results of the study because the researcher does not work in the same capacity as a teacher. Therefore, the researcher was able to remove any personal beliefs. The researcher recognized there was a close relationship between the topic of the study and her current position with a school district, however the researcher was able to emotionally separate herself to present unbiased results. The researcher was able to confide in other professionals who had recently completed studies as a way to decompress.

Summary

The way of educating students, especially special education students, changed when remote learning was implemented in New Jersey. Carrying out and implementing remote learning changed the face of education. The way it changed is still being studied as are its long-term effects on the teachers. Understanding how special education teachers were able to teach their students without interrupting their education is significant. To properly conduct this study and find out how COVID-19 affected special education teachers, the researcher interviewed the teachers and analyzed the data. The collection of data allowed the researcher to gain information from the perspective of special education teachers working in a variety of different school districts in different counties within New Jersey during the pandemic. After all the data was collected it was interpreted and the common themes were identified based on the experiences of special education teachers.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of middle school special education teachers teaching remotely in New Jersey during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 took the world by surprise and the pandemic had a trickle-down effect on society as we once knew it. Mandatory closings started to take effect all over the world including the institutions for educating children. Although educating students had to continue, the delivery of education changed drastically. The education of students continued despite mandatory school closings in New Jersey.

This study allowed middle school teachers to share their experiences and also gave them a forum to describe their experiences of teaching special education students remotely. New Jersey was mandated to close schools and implement remote learning during 2019–2020 (March 2020–June 2020). Some schools were closed for the entire 2020–2021 school year. Special education teachers were asked to share their experiences with remote learning and disclose any stress or anxiety they had while teaching their students during the pandemic. The researcher has examined the direct impact COVID-19 had on the educators who were teaching students remotely within the state of New Jersey. By conducting this study, the researcher will have the opportunity to bring awareness to the difficulties that special education teachers encountered while educating their students remotely during the pandemic.

Participants

The participants in this study are all middle school special education teachers who taught special education students remotely during COVID-19. Middle schools in New Jersey comprise grades 6, 7, and 8. All the participants in this study have their special education certifications,

which allow them to teach special education students. There are a total of ten participants in this study. To maintain their anonymity, the ten participants are referred to here with the following pseudonyms: Participant-(1) Debbie, Participant-(2) Cassie, Participant-(3) Missy, Participant-(4) Kelly, Participant-(5) Linda, Participant-(6) Daile, Participant-(7) Amelia, Participant-(8) Kim, Participant-(9) Rebecca and Participant-(10) Theresa.

Participants Chart

Participant	Name	Age	Gender	Years of Teaching SE	Highest Degree	Grade Taught	Ethnicity
Participant 1	Debbie	38	Female	14 Years	Bachelor's Degree	6th, 7th, 8th	White
Participant 2	Cassie	60	Female	20 Years	Ed.D	6th, 7th	White
Participant 3	Missy	47	Female	14 Years	Master's Degree	6th, 8th	White
Participant 4	Kelly	53	Female	12 Years	Master's Degree	6th, 8th	White
Participant 5	Linda	42	Female	19 Years	Master's Degree	6th, 7th, 8th	Other
Participant 6	Daile	62	Female	36 Years	Bachelor's Degree	6th	White
Participant 7	Amelia	52	Female	21 Years	Master's Degree	6th	African American
Participant 8	Kim	27	Female	4 Years	Bachelor's Degree	7th	White
Participant 9	Rebecca	32	Female	8 Years	Bachelor's Degree	6th	White
Participant 10	Theresa	33	Female	6 Years	Master's Degree	7th, 8th	Hispanic and White
		44.6 average		15.4 average			

Each of the participants' stories are presented in the following subsections with detailed information about their individual experiences of teaching virtually during COVID-19. The analysis of the transcribed interviews identifies main and sub themes that were generated from

their experiences. Some of the sub themes or less common themes that were identified and mentioned by the participants included the lack of preparation given to staff, concern about the possible learning gaps with students, no down time for staff to regroup, the availability of meals (breakfast and lunch) for students, and dealing with difficult parents without any buffering. The most common themes identified by the participants were the lack of social interactions, technology difficulties, stress and anxiety felt by the teachers and the lack of focus and engagements from the students.

The researcher determined to report each participant experience in a narrative format because it allows each person to have their own voice to report their story in their own words. The researcher wanted to give each participant a space of their own in this subsection to fully describe their personal experiences they encountered during COVID-19. The researcher aspired to give as much highly detailed information as possible to allow each person reading the data to develop a full, clear, and concise picture of the personal experience of each participant.

Teacher Narratives

Debbie's Experience

I don't think anyone was mentally prepared for that. Um, it was very taxing—more so than being in a regular classroom. -Debbie

Debbie identified herself as a 30-year-old Caucasian female and has been working in the educational field for 18 years. However, Debbie has been teaching special education students for the past 14 years. She taught special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic—specifically 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students within a multiple-disability classroom setting. This population of students in this setting consisted of nonreaders and some nonverbal students.

Because of COVID-19, Debbie's school district started educating students remotely during the 2019–2021 school year and also during the 2021–2022 school year. Debbie was out on maternity leave initially; therefore, she felt out of the loop when her district decided to go virtual in March 2020. She slowly began to hear whispers of the possibilities of this pandemic shutting down schools all over the State, however she did not really process it until it happened. She was not aware of the district plan in place until the last minute. The district had been attempting to put things into place; however, they were not fully aware of strategies themselves because the school systems had never closed before.

"I don't think any of the districts are honestly prepared".

Debbie's first day back from her maternity leave was her first day of virtual teaching with her students. Debbie described this feeling as "overwhelming" because she was trying to figure out how teaching special education students virtually would benefit her students. This unanswered question resulted in Debbie admitting she was clearly not prepared educationally or mentally to teach students virtually.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Teaching special education students is challenging face-to-face in general, teaching special education virtually increased this challenge. "Teaching remotely was one of the most challenging experiences [she has] ever encountered". Debbie was given "zero time to plan." Therefore, she was not knowledgeable of the best strategic way to educate her students. Although there were tools that Debbie used in the face-to-face setting that she was able to apply in a virtual setting, there were not many. However, she was trying to be as clever as possible. One thing Debbie knew for sure is that the students needed a good routine to make virtual learning work. Debbie thought about trying to have a morning group as she did every

morning face-to-face by getting the students to log onto the computer and navigate their way to the classroom to watch a video. This routine took some time for each student to master; however, in time the students started to pick it up.

Challenges Faced

When Debbie was notified her school district was going virtual, she had no clue how she was going to educate her students. It appeared to be a mad scramble to figure out how the students were going to properly continue their education. Debbie's students are hands-on learners and nonverbal students. Being in an in-person classroom setting was the only way they were used to being taught. Debbie quickly realized the teaching strategies she once used for the past 14 years in the classroom for special needs students would have to be modified and adjusted to meet the needs of her students.

Prior to the students leaving school on a Friday (in March 2020), the district had distributed chromebooks to each student. This was a great idea, because many of the students within the district did not have their own chromebooks. However, there was another concern that was later realized by the administration in the district. Some students' homes were either without WIFI or they had poor connections that caused lagging and delays. The lagging and delays hindered the effectiveness of the communication between the teacher and students. Once the school district realized WIFI was a concern, they distributed hotspots to the students and their families. This was such a helpful tool because it helped increased the connection and communication between students and staff.

Debbie also found that teaching her students how to navigate their way with the technology piece was challenging. The students were not aware of how to log on daily to their computer. This required a username and password; however, keep in mind these were students

who were nonreaders and now had to know how to identify the alphabet. Many of the students in

Debbie's classroom are nonverbal so they could not communicate to Debbie that they were

having difficulties. Debbie relied on parents and siblings to help assist students with logging on

daily and entering the classroom.

Debbie herself had recently purchased her own laptop prior to COVD-19. This was

helpful because it was updated technology, as opposed to the older laptop she had been

using. But Debbie also had some internet connection issues herself.

> *"The internet went out in my neighborhood, and I called and added a hotspot to my cell*
>
> *phone so I could still get on and be able to go into my Google meeting to meet with the*
>
> *kids."*

Debbie also experienced some difficulties with utilizing the platform her school district

designated for virtual learning. There was a lack of training ahead of time and she was expected

to "make it work." Debbie's school district educated their students through the google platform,

however this had never been used before in any way to teach students. Teachers in general were

expected to use google classrooms and google meet to educate students every day. There was no

separate platform geared specifically for special education students. Debbie had a difficult time

trying to figure out how she would educate her students who were multiple disabled. She was not

sure of the type of digital tools she would use to ensure her students were learning. Debbie's

students were not used to using computers so teaching them how to navigate was a challenge by

itself and learning to use a chromebook was the obstacle to overcome. Having the students log

on daily was a great goal for the students to work towards. This goal took a lot of drill, repetition,

and assistance from the parents and paraprofessionals.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Debbie strategically had to figure out the best method to teach her students. These students were used to hands-on activities and being face-to-face with their teacher and peers. One of the programs that her school district had purchased was *GoGuardian*. This was a program that allowed the teachers to monitor the different sites students were using on their chromebooks. This program gives the teacher access to monitor their student's whereabouts on the computer while they are active. It allows the teachers to track everything the student is doing on their chromebook. So, when Debbie asked the students to go to a particular site, if they had difficulties, she could walk them through the process by using *GoGuardian*.

Mental Health

"Gosh, probably some depression and anxiety. It was very isolating."

Debbie was a new mom, and her husband was a firefighter. Debbie's husband had to report to work every day because he was a first responder, therefore staying home was not an option for him. Debbie stayed home with their son, while her husband would go out to work and take care of everything that needed to be done outside of the home, such as the grocery shopping, paying bills, or running any type of errand.

> *"I never left the house. I didn't know for months because I was terrified of bringing something home to my newborn and it was a very scary time. Like, my anxiety levels were very high."*

Debbie related to being stressed from having a newborn at home, keeping him safe from germs that her husband could bring home, teaching students remotely, and the entire pandemic in general. Debbie had some friends who had passed away because of COVID-19.

Teaching her students was stressful because she wanted to make sure they were receiving the best education possible and having their educational needs met. There was nothing normal about educating her students virtually, but she tried her best to make it work. Debbie and another teacher would have activities together virtually so their students could interact with one another.

Prior to COVID-19, Debbie described her life as, "pretty good." She was pregnant, expecting her first child. She and her husband could not be happier. She had her son in December 2019 and was so excited to be able to share this joy with her family and friends. Family and friends were able to visit her and her son while she was home on maternity leave. Suddenly, the pandemic arose, and all the visitations were halted. She felt like the village and support she once had for months was gone in an instant.

> *"I'm not going to let it get me emotional right now. Because it was hard, you know. I had a newborn. I wasn't able to have a lot of the support that I needed, my husband was going and working, you know, as a first responder. And it was, it was hard, like, and even finding things that we needed to try and keep us safe from him working in that environment was difficult. Like with the price gouging of Lysol and wipes online, it was absurd."*

Moving through COVID-19, Debbie's anxiety increased as the pandemic continued to affect society. Debbie felt her stress level increasing, and she was becoming more anxious. Initially, Debbie did not reach out for mental health services. While in the middle of the pandemic Debbie became pregnant with her second child. Now, she had more responsibility and her anxiety and stress level increased even more. This is when Debbie decided she needed to seek professional help for her mental health. Debbie began seeing a therapist. In conjunction with therapy, she was also medicated for anxiety and stress.

Life for Debbie post COVID-19 is less challenging. It took time for things to start to get back to some normalcy. There were small steps taken, with a lot of caution. Debbie was thrilled to return to in-person teaching during the 2022–2023 school year. She is now enjoying her life with her two sons and husband. She continues to be mindful that COVID-19 still exists as do the challenges she faced.

Summary

Debbie's narrative regarding her experiences highlighted the challenges she faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Debbie's challenges ranged from her being stressed, having anxiety and taking medication to help manage her mental health. These experiences Debbie has shared have brought attention to how teaching special education students during the pandemic added additional stress to her life. Unfortunately, Debbie was not able to receive all the support she needed to sustain herself as a teacher and new mom. There were moments when she felt alone, and she was not able to go out into society and enjoy life.

Cassie's Experience

"*They had no plan. Um, the plan was put into place after the fact, um, and the plan was actually driven more so by the actual teachers and administration, in my opinion.*"

Cassie identified herself as a 60-year-old Caucasian female who has been teaching special education for over 20 years. Cassie taught special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cassie taught 6th and 7th grade special education students within an inclusion setting for math. The population of the class was students who require modification and accommodation based on their IEP. Cassie taught students with a variety of classifications, and it was based on their individual disability. Some students are working close to their grade level, and some are working below their grade level. Cassie identified her school district as a

Title I school district, which meant the district received supplemental funds and grants through the state and federal government. The district also received money for special education students, however this would go into the general fund for the school districts.

Cassie worked in a school district that closed its doors in March 2020 and taught students remotely because of the pandemic. Throughout Cassie's tenure as a teacher, this was something unimaginable and the teachers were expected to know exactly what to do and how to handle such an unprecedented time of teaching special education students.

"*There was not a cohesive, preplanned way to handle home instruction.*"

Cassie herself was prepared technology-wise; she had her own computers at home and loved technology in general. Cassie considered herself to be a tech savvy person since she was more familiar with the technological part than the average teacher. She knew immediately that she needed to increase her bandwidth at home to ensure she was prepared for both the students and her own household. Although Cassie was prepared with technology, she knew many of her coworkers were not. Cassie remembers many of her coworkers being stressed by not having any knowledge of how to teach their students virtually. "They were very stressed, and they were beside themselves." They had no clue how they were even going to approach this task. Many teachers did not have their own computers, laptops, or chromebooks at home and did not have any knowledge of how to use the Google platform. Thankfully the district was able to supply many teachers with chromebooks, however there was no training on how to use the platform the school district was using.

"Teachers were not prepared. They didn't have the infrastructure, students didn't either. They didn't have the bandwidth or WIFI."

The lack of knowledge on how to utilize the platform and technology was frustrating and Cassie didn't understand why the district was not going to assist the staff with any type of training. This did not leave a good feeling for any of the teachers.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

"*Well, teaching remote learning was totally new. We were not prepared for it in any form or fashion.*"

Cassie loves teaching–it is a passion of hers. When COVID-19 came into existence, everything for Cassie changed when her school district was forced into teaching students virtually. Cassie had no clue how she would present instructional learning to her special education students virtually. The platform the district was going to be utilizing for teaching students was through Google Meet. The district was fortunate enough to provide each student with a chromebook. Cassie has background experience in technology and was noticeably more tech savvy than her coworkers even when teaching was face-to-face. Many teachers relied on Cassie to assist with technology during in-person learning with their white boards, digital programs, and the basics of how to maneuver through a computer. Technology was not a concern for Cassie; it was the least of her worries. Cassie had other teachers reaching out to her for training about the technology piece because the district was not providing any type of support. Cassie found herself training her coworkers on how to set up two monitors, showing them how to share their screens, group students together and use breakout rooms. Just knowing the basics on how to set up a google classroom was challenging for some teachers, especially the older teachers.

Challenges Faced

The first challenge Cassie experienced was the lack of knowledge and experience she and the staff had for teaching students remotely. None of the teachers ever experienced teaching remotely, now suddenly this was the expectation for educating students. Everyone was wondering how this happened.

"Teachers were expected to pony up and learn on their own. Teachers were expected to do a lot of things they were not trained for, and they did. Teachers' stepped up admirably, I thought in my opinion."

Although the training took some time it was well worth it in Cassie's eyes. Cassie also found herself doing more research to find the best methods to educate her students. Some of her students were diagnosed with ADHD, reading difficulties, and math difficulties.

Another challenge for Cassie was keeping her students engaged in the learning process during instructional time, especially those who are ADHD students. The expectation was for students to log into their Google Meet classroom and listen to the teacher over the computer for hours. It was difficult and challenging enough to keep students engaged in-person let alone virtually. As a teacher in person, Cassie was able to walk by a student's desk and ask them to pay attention, tap them on the shoulder, tell them to get back on task, or give them a simple nod. There were students who kept their emoji on their screen, kept their hoodies over their heads, and Cassie would just see a shadow.

"You don't know if they're sleeping or not. Sometimes I'd hear a snore or two."

Not only did Cassie have to keep the students engaged but also monitor their whereabouts during the lessons to make sure the student was on task. This is the age of students and social media and video games. Students would much rather check their social media and play video

games than listen to their teacher who is on the other side of the computer. This is when *GoGuardian* was a useful resource for educators to monitor what websites students were actually on during instructional time and independent classroom time. This was a great example of how the teacher have any ability to disconnect the student from a website not related to the class.

Cassie also experienced parents who were challenging. Many parents were upset with the whole virtual learning setup. Some parents would report that their children would not get out of bed for school, and some parents reported their child said they felt depressed and didn't want to get on the computer. The parents felt as though they needed additional support at home, but the guidance counselor or social worker could hardly go to their homes to help them with their child. Some parents would report to Cassie that their child would get on social media instead of being in class. Parents were also stressed and taking their frustration out on the teachers. Cassie had several parents that were yelling about the school district while she would be in the middle of a lesson teaching the students. Cassie felt bad for parents because they are not teachers, counselors, or administrators and they needed help.

Special education students have Individualized Education Program (IEP), and having the ability to implement their accommodations and modifications virtually was difficult.

> *"IEP say give re-directions, monitor participation, use proximity, preferred seating. You know all these things you know they went by the wayside."*

Cassie tried to implement as much as she could virtually for her students, but she knew she was adhering to the IEP. The district did not have a plan in place for the general education population so there was really no reason to look for additional support for special education students.

Cassie also related to not having any down time "after school hours." There was no separation between work and home, each carried over into the other. This resulted in Cassie working late by either talking to parents or giving students extra help after hours. Cassie also had her own kids at home that needed just as much attention. One of her children is a special needs student and she was trying to make sure his needs were met as well. So, Cassie really understood how other parents could feel not having the support for their special needs students. She could relate to how and why some students didn't show up for class because their own routine is off track. Cassie also worried when students didn't show up for class. She would call the students and parents or use other methods to try to contact someone in the home. Cassie was always wondering whether they were okay. Did they eat? Are they sick? This caused Cassie to worry about the overall well-being of her students.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

"You know special needs students, they're all unique and they're all different. Special needs students have a really hard time staying focused on a lesson virtually or in-person."

The district had distributed chromebooks to each student. Cassie was very pleased that students were given chromebooks and WIFI. Many families were not able to afford chromebooks on their own, especially if a household had many children. One of the helpful tools that Cassie's school district implemented and used was *GoGuardian*.

"GoGuardian helped us to monitor what students were on task. We could see them on the screen all at one time, which you know you could not do when it was Google."

The district taught students utilizing the Google platform. This allowed Cassie to build classrooms, put assignments into Google Classroom, and have breakout sessions for the

students. This platform also allowed for the other teachers to view each other's virtual classrooms and see the work that the student was expected to complete. It was a great way for teachers to communicate with one another because there were no team meetings.

"We could put the kids into groups, break them out into groups."

The teachers were also able to provide extra assistance to students after school for those who had difficulties with concepts. Cassie enjoyed using Khan Academy as a supplemental tool to help students learn through short online videos that were grade-level based. The videos and lessons were paired together for the students to maximize their learning experience. It gave the students extra time to practice the material they had learned during instructional time. Students could use this supplemental tool on their own time or stay later with Cassie for extra assistance.

Cassie's school district also purchased two other digital computer-based programs to assist with the learning process. Teachers utilized IXL and Achieve 3000. These programs allowed Cassie to give the students a more traditional type of setting. Cassie tried to be as flexible with the students as possible. After all, they were on the computer all day long. Cassie did not give her students homework. Cassie believed the students were not going to be engaged in instruction time all day on the computer and then complete homework independently.

Mental Health

Cassie had some concerns about her mental health. Her self-care time decreased, and her stress level went up. As a result, she started to get high blood pressure. During this time, her mother and uncle passed away from COVID-19. As a result of these two deaths, Cassie's youngest son went into a deep depression and developed anxiety. Cassie was emotionally drained and felt overwhelmed and stressed all in a matter of months. Cassie didn't always want

to be active, and she sometimes did not want to do anything. She was not taking care of herself, which means she could not take care of her family properly.

Emotionally, prior to COVID-19, Cassie was good. Everything in her life was going well for her and her family. She enjoyed being a teacher, she spent time with her family, and everyone was involved in activities. She loved staying after school to help students and getting involved in her school community.

During COVID-19, Cassie felt stressed. Her eating habits changed, she wasn't exercising, she wasn't taking time out for herself, and her social interactions changed. She felt isolated from her family, friends, and coworkers. Time for herself was very limited because of working longer hours to make sure her students' needs were met and to also make sure her children were academically staying on point.

"*I wasn't getting my time because once I got off of tutoring, tutoring always went longer because I had special education kids that needed more help. And it's, uh, really hard for a teacher to walk away and say okay, my time is up. Goodbye.*"

As Cassie tries to recoup from the aftereffects of COVID-19, she still feels some stressors. Things are not back to normal because COVID-19 continues to linger and there are stressors that were a result of COVID. Cassie doesn't think the world will ever be the same and the students will have gaps in their learning because of COVID.

Summary

Cassie's experience with COVID was highlighted by some challenges that varied. Cassie seemed to have fewer challenges with the technology piece during her time teaching virtually. Cassie enjoys technology; therefore, that was an easy task for Cassie to embrace. Cassie had some coworkers who were not able to navigate their way through the

platform their school district designated for learning. Cassie believes her district did an excellent job providing the students with chromebooks and WIFI. This was definitely a benefit for students and families because many families are not able to afford chromebooks. Although technology assistance was provided, the infrastructure was still challenging because the whole state was educating students virtually. Everything seemed to move slowly, and it was not a good setup.

Cassie did experience some challenges teaching her students. She believes overall her district was not prepared to teach students virtually, especially special education students. There was little direction from the district. Cassie found it challenging to keep her students' attention, keep them involved in learning, and even get them to show up for class.

Mentally, Cassie felt stressed and overwhelmed, and she never envisioned something like teaching students virtually could ever happen. She thought she was ready for the challenge, however she learned quickly she was not. During COVID, Cassie developed high blood pressure and was stressed. She lost her mother and uncle during this time and as a result, her son suffered from depression and both developed anxiety.

Missy's Experience

Missy identified herself as a 47-year-old Caucasian female and had been teaching special education for over 21 years. Missy taught special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Missy taught 6th- and 8th-grade middle school special education students within a resource pullout setting for English Language Arts (ELA). This population of students have academic challenges in reading and are working below their grade level in reading and writing. Missy worked in a school district that taught students virtually because of the pandemic.

When Missy was informed that her district was going virtual, she remembers having a couple days' notice to start her preparations. In Missy's opinion she was not allotted enough time to continue to teach her students in person while preparing for remote learning the following week. Missy became worried because there was no training offered to the staff on how to utilize the platform for teaching the students virtually. Missy relied on conducting research on her own to find out the best way to learn about the platform and how to integrate her teaching method effectively to her special education students. Missy's students had difficulties with their reading abilities and comprehension skills. Therefore, trying to teach them virtually would be challenging because they were already struggling in reading and needed assistance within the classroom. Missy is not aware of the funding source for her school district; however, she believes there is some type of funding that is given to her district.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

> *"I had to work really hard to keep the kids engaged, to get kids to show up, and we had to use an online program to do this."*

Teaching students virtually was an experience Missy says she will never forget. COVID-19 was something totally different and unexpected. It really caught everyone off guard and the school systems struggled to find a quick way to educate students. When teaching students in person students would cut class often or come to class late, and it would be up to security to locate these students. If a student didn't show up for classes virtually, teachers were limited as to what they were able to do. Who was the teacher to hold accountable for a student being absent, cutting class, or refusing to do work? This was a question no one seemed able to answer. But if students did not attend, the teachers were asked why the student had missed so many days of school.

Some students relied on virtual learning as a social outlet. They were not allowed to go out to see their friends so some just showed up to socialize. This became a challenge because students would want to talk during instructional time or use the chat options while Missy was teaching. This became a huge distraction and Missy had to try to manage everything at one time, which was difficult.

Challenges Faced

"*Students were given chromebooks in order to log into their classrooms.*"

Although students were issued chromebooks, some students did not have any internet service at their home. The district was able to purchase and distribute hot spots for students and families who were in need. Some students would use poor connection services as an excuse to either not log into their classes or say their internet service was poor or it was lagging too much for them to understand the teacher. The hot spots that were distributed by the school district were not very good according to many of the parents and students. Some students relied on their cell phones to use as hot spots.

Another challenge was getting students to show up consistently every day. Some students were very creative about why they missed a class or even an entire day of school. It seemed odd that students were missing classes while their parents were home as well because everything was shut down. Practically nothing was open, but students were not showing up for class. Many of the students just had no interest in learning virtually. But there were some that attended daily and participated with no complaints.

It was also difficult to make any type of connection with the students over the computer. The students could shut their cameras off, act as though they had poor connections, or just not engage at all. Trying to find a way to connect with the kids everyday was very

challenging. Missy had to be creative and find different ways to reach the students. Some things worked well, and some were major failures. Missy realized that the students who were truly invested in their education were the students who were showing up every day and making the most of the unfortunate situation they were handed.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

The best approach for Missy teaching her students was for her to give incentives for them to show up for class daily, complete their work, and participate in class. Some of the students bought into the incentives and then there were some who did not. The students who did not buy into the incentives were the students who had a pattern or history of cutting class when school was in-person. These students created more of a challenge, and made Missy continue to think outside the box of how to encourage students to show up for school every day. Although Missy came up with a great idea, she was still not able to successfully reach and engage some students.

Mental Health

Missy was aware of the stressors her coworkers were exhibiting. She understood that many teachers felt stressed and anxious about teaching students virtually. Missy did not have any mental health concerns during COVID-19.

"No, I was able to handle it."

Missy had kids of her own at home and kept them on task and focused because the school district her children attended were remote as well. Missy was able to create a good balance between teaching her special education students and taking care of her mental health. She admitted the only concern she had was trying to teach in the house with her kids and everyone's voices were overlapping. Everyone could hear each other, teachers, peers, and everything else that was going on in everyone's home. There was not a lot of privacy. Sometimes her own

personal kids became a little "needy." Sometimes they seemed to forget she was teaching her students and they wanted some of her attention. As time passed, Missy's family was able to manage and have a successful year.

Prior to COVID-19, Missy's life was fine. She enjoyed spending time with her family and going out with her friends. During COVID-19, Missy felt some stress but nothing major. She felt a little stressed because she felt as though she could never get a break and have her own time to herself. Everything was closed and everyone was at home and there was no place for anyone to go. Because of everything shutting down, no one was able to go anywhere—there was no place for anyone to escape. The kids were used to going out and spending time with their friends. Post-COVID-19, Missy felt some stress of having to catch the students up from being virtual. She believed the pandemic created a learning gap.

> *"Students missed out, because with special education kids, there's a lot of going over and helping them, and you can't do that virtually."*

Students definitely had some learning gaps, and many were pushed along. Students missed a lot learning virtually, academically and in social interaction with their peers. Students were not able to grow emotionally, and it showed when they returned to in-person learning. Students were not as vocal over the computer as they would have been if they were face-to- face. Students did not actively engage in conversation with one another as they would have when they were face-to face.

Summary

Missy's narrative regarding her experience with COVID-19 was filled with the challenges of getting students to show up for class, and when they did, keeping them engaged was a lot of work. Virtual learning was not well received by some of the students; they wanted to

be in school. Some students did not show up at all, and some that did had no real interest in participating.

Missy had to make adjustments for herself and her family. One of the adjustments she had to make was not having any down time for herself. This is when Missy felt some stress because of lack of self-care time.

The most noticeable challenge for Missy was the lack of training for staff on how to fully utilize the platform her district was using for virtual learning. She also believes that virtual learning created some learning gaps for students. Because some students did not show up for classes regularly, and some that showed up did not engage to the level of expectations, it created some educational gaps.

Kelly's Experience

Kelly identified herself as a 53-year-old Caucasian female who has been teaching special education for over 24 years. Kelly taught special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kelly taught 7th- and 8th-grade middle school special education students within a Resource Pullout Math and In-Class support (ICS) for ELA. Kelly's population of ICS students had academic challenges in math and required some modifications and accommodations in math specifically. Kelly's population of students in ELA had some challenges in reading and are working below their grade level in reading and writing.

Kelly worked in a school district that taught students remotely because of the pandemic. Kelly recalls receiving an email on a Wednesday from her administrator telling staff to prepare their students to stay home the following week because of the pandemic. Kelly advised all her students to make sure they took all of their personal items and school supplies

home with them. There was very little time given to teachers to properly prepare themselves and their students for what was to come for the remainder of the school year.

> *"I started mentally preparing for what might happen because we didn't know if we were going to be closed for a week or two weeks."*

Kelly knew she had to start to pull herself together to prepare for what was to come for the students educationally. It wasn't about the material she was going to be teaching, she was used to that. It was about the delivery through technology that left her feeling uncertain. After all she had been teaching for years in a physical building. Now, suddenly, this routine would change in a matter of days.

> *"So, we sent the students home, we had the weekend to prepare, and we didn't come back to school. They set us up with Zoom links and kind of explained that to us because for us...this for me for sure was the first time ever using Zoom."*

The school district gave Kelly a brief overview of what to do and what not to do on Zoom, but it was quick. The overview of how to use this platform for an older person is a lot different than explaining it to the much younger generation of teachers. The teachers were also given the option of using Google Classroom. Google Classroom allowed the teachers to put the students' work into that platform and create the actual classroom for all the students.

Kelly's school district received Title I money and received grants from the state of New Jersey. The money was allotted for positive incentives, help with behavioral programs, and reading programs.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Kelly has been teaching for 24 years and never imagined that one day she would be teaching special education students virtually. Initially, Kelly had to figure out what would be the

best approach for her to teach her students. Kelly set up a makeshift classroom in her home, with a whiteboard so students could have a visual. Math is a subject that must be taught by guiding the students through visuals, showing the steps and allowing the students to visually see all the steps to better understand the concepts. Kelly was also able to implement some videos to share to help students understand new concepts. The videos were helpful because they walked the student through step-by-step and explained the steps in detail.

Challenges Faced

Keeping the students engaged was a hurdle to overcome. Many of the students Kelly was teaching had some concerns about COVID-19 and the impact it had on their families, friends, and the community. Because the students were so concerned, Kelly gave them an opportunity to talk daily as a group for the first ten minutes of class.

> *"We spent the first, you know, 10 minutes of the class just talking about how everybody was doing because I needed to make sure they were in check. I mean, it was hard, that was a really hard time for the students."*

When students were in-person they would have their counselors to talk with about how they were feeling. Kelly had to provide some support to the students in an area she is not trained in, but she didn't want the kids to feel like their questions would go unanswered. Kelly tried her best to address every student's needs educationally and emotionally.

Because Kelly was not a tech-savvy person she was very concerned with how she was expected to teach her students virtually on a platform she was unfamiliar with.

> **"***I'm not a tech-savvy person, so it was challenging for me, I was very nervous."*

When Kelly first logged into their initial classroom setting virtually, she felt like she was on an episode of the "Brady Bunch." There were just a bunch of squares and students looking at her waiting.

"If you would have told me 10 years ago, I was going to be doing this, I would have been laughing right in your face because I am not a tech person. Trust me."

Kelly recalls having a meeting ahead of time with administration and the technology department. They wanted to make sure the staff had time to get acclimated to the platform. Being acclimated, understanding a platform, and actually using it are very different discussions. Although they took the time to show staff it was relatively quick and there was no time to actually practice what was taught.

"We were all like deer caught in headlights. So, it was a whirlwind."

The new way of teaching the students presented a challenge, and no one had ever done this before. No one knew what to expect. This was a teachable moment for everyone involved— administrators, teachers and students. But it was great to see that no one ever had a negative comment. There was no time for negativity because everyone had a job to do and that was to continue to educate the students. It was definitely a lot of trial and error. Although Kelly is not a tech-savvy person, she was open to trying what the district had put into place because it wasn't about her but about the students.

Another challenge Kelly encountered were the reasoning's or excuses the students could come up with as to why they were not in class. Many of the students attributed their failure to attend class on the poor WIFI at their home. The school district tried to work with the local cable company to make sure that the internet service was accessible and working properly. Kelly knew at this point she had to find a way to get the students to attend class and also keep her students

engaged. She tried to be as creative as possible. Some of the students were receptive and others expressed wanting to play Fortnite instead of being in class. Kelly knew she could not compete with Fortnite because of its popularity, so she really had to come up with some great ideas. As incentives, Kelly would allow the students to earn free time, play games together as a class or earn small prizes for their participation. Many of the students bought into the ideas, which helped raise attendance and classroom participation.

Another challenge for Kelly was not having the ability to have human contact with her students. She was so used to being directly in front of the students and now she's staring at them through a little camera. She loved having the ability to reach out to them, being able to read their body language, and physically see their all-around demeanor.

"So that would probably be the biggest thing, just not being able to be right there with them, you know face-to-face."

Kelly was concerned about the students who relied on breakfast and lunch at school as their main meals. At least when they were in school, she knew they were eating daily. Kelly's school district was not prepared to make sure the students who relied on breakfast and lunch were eating. But eventually the school district came up with a food service plan to supply breakfast and lunch for students and their families for a couple days at a time.

"The district took into consideration how was a family going to feed these kids three meals a day when they couldn't afford to feed them one meal a day."

The school was able to supply families with meals. The family was just required to pick up the food and it didn't matter how many people were in the home. This took some stress off Kelly knowing the children had food available to them and their families.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Kelly takes pride in the technology department within her district. Kelly credits them with doing an excellent job of ensuring all the students had chromebooks and the younger kids in the district had IPADs. It was a quick turn-around for the IT department from the time they were alerted to virtual learning to the time they quickly distributed the chromebooks to the students. Kelly, as a teacher, was pleased to see how quickly the team worked together.

Teaching special education students can be challenging in person, so teaching them virtually was even more challenging. When students are taught in person, they are given manipulatives to help them with their math problems. Manipulatives are physical tools to help students become more engaged in their learning process from a concrete experience to an abstract reasoning. Most students do not have any manipulatives on hand at their homes. Kelly tried to bridge the gap by providing the necessary tools for the students to be successful from home.

> *"I remember sending them home with their workbooks. And then for some students that were on that day, I remember during my prep vividly throwing together in Ziploc bags any kind of manipulatives. Making sure they had their multiplication charts, making sure they had rulers, making sure they had the supplies when they went home because we didn't know at the time how long it was going to be."*

Kelly had to be creative with how she was going to educate her students successfully in math. She was willing to pull out all the stops necessary to make sure the students were receiving the best education they could under the circumstances. Because Kelly knew the importance of students having manipulatives and things that are tangible, she immediately started thinking of her students' needs and how to best meet those needs. Before the students left, Kelly had made small bags of manipulatives to give to each student in her class. She also made copies from

workbook pages to give to students to take home because they were not able to give each student their own workbook to take home. She sent home as much as she could on such short notice. As the weeks went on with COVID-19, and everyone was still home, Kelly needed to get more items to her students. She made more bags and then she dropped them off at students' homes. The students were happy to see their teacher stop by their house to give them tools they needed for class. The bags consisted of whiteboards, dry erase markers, dry erase boards so the student could have them during their instructional time. Kelly provided these tools so that when she taught class the students would have everything, they needed to write down their answers and show it on the boards. Kelly also made accommodations for the students when they had to take tests. Because the students were used to taking tests with pen and paper, Kelly would hand deliver their tests to them at their homes. Once they completed their test, they were expected to upload their test to her for grading. This system she put into place worked well for both Kelly and the students. This also gave Kelly the opportunity to do check-ins with her students. She found that some students might not want to disclose or talk about certain things virtually that they would tell her in person. Kelly enjoyed having a good relationship with her students.

Mental Health

Mentally, Kelly can admit she was not prepared for teaching students virtually. Kelly likes being prepared, and, in this situation, she felt as though she was not. She had no control of this situation and she had to adjust, just like everyone else. COVID-19 came out of the middle of nowhere. Dealing with a pandemic on such an enormous level, she knew this was a situation she had no control over.

"I like being prepared and this stresses me out. I think it was my first stressor, not feeling prepared. I'm not a control freak, which is ironic because at that point everything was kind of out of my control. So, that was a huge learning lesson for me."

When COVID-19 started, Kelly already had some personal issues she was dealing with, and the pandemic pushed her over the edge. Everything became overwhelming all at one time.

"Then when the pandemic came, everything stopped, my whole world stopped. Like everything was falling down at once"

It just seemed like everything started going wrong at the same time, and she could feel her stress level building up. Kelly was going through a divorce, and her mother needed back surgery. Kelly could feel the stress level continuing to build up, and she knew she needed to seek help from a professional. Kelly started going to therapy to help find a way to navigate through everything that was taking place in her life. She was feeling stressed more and more as time passed and the pandemic showed no signs of being over. Kelly was starting to lose weight because her stress level was high. As a result of everything Kelly was feeling, she made the decision to start going to therapy. In addition to therapy, Kelly started to implement an exercise routine in her day. She would walk or run four to five miles per day.

"So, overall, I mean I held it together. I was pretty good. But I attribute that to me exercising and everything else and then taking time for myself. Self-care became important."

To help Kelly cope better, she stopped watching the news daily. The news was filled with COVID-19 updates every day and it became too much for her to handle. Instead, she started to watch the news maybe once a week just to keep updated on everything that was taking place around the world.

Summary

Kelly's narrative regarding her experience during virtual learning highlighted the challenges she faced with mental health issues, trying to provide modifications to students, and providing check-in for students daily. Kelly took advantage of the opportunity to talk with her students one-on-one when she dropped off material at their homes. This helped provide some comfort to the students as well as to herself.

Mentally, Kelly was not prepared for virtual learning, and it took its toll on her. In addition to dealing with the pandemic, she also had family issues taking place at the same time. As a result of the stress Kelly was dealing with, she decided to go to therapy. Therapy was one of the best decisions she could have made.

Kelly found trying to consistently keep the students engaged difficult. Some students didn't like to attend virtual school, but Kelly was willing to try anything to get them there and actively participating.

Linda's Experience

Linda identified herself as a 42-year-old other, non-Hispanic female who has been teaching special education for over 19 years. Linda taught special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. She taught 6th-,7th-, and 8th-grade special education students. This population of students were in a self-contained classroom setting for cognitively impaired learners. All the students in Linda's class had an IQ below 70.

Linda is not aware of the funding source for her school district; however, she believes her district receives money from the state to help with programs and funding teachers' salaries. Money is also given to the district for students with IEPs, which she believes goes into a general fund.

Linda worked in a school district that closed its doors in March 2020 and taught students remotely because of the pandemic. Linda distinctly remembers school closing on a Friday and the district going full remote the following Monday. It was just a little more than a 48-hour notice to get prepared for this life-changing experience. Linda felt like it was a mad scramble to get things together for herself and her students.

"You know you have to get your stuff in case we don't come back. And then I said there's no way we're not coming back. This is not happening, until it happened!"

Linda became concerned because many of her students received additional services such as speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. She didn't understand how the students' needs were going to be met with these services and it was mandated per their IEPs.

"The speech therapist would come in, but I don't know how much they really got from it because it was not the best way to receive services. Especially since the computers lagged. It was just terrible. Like the technology was too laggy for them to get the services."

Although the computers lagged during instructional time and therapy time, Linda was happy to see everyone was trying and working together. It was really a team effort and there were some positive moments in the midst of chaos.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Initially Linda thought it was just a rumor that all school districts were going to remote teaching. She remembers her classroom paraprofessional coming to her telling her that schools would be closing because of the pandemic. Linda's students were cognitively impaired, so they were not familiar with learning via a computer. Linda would teach her students with pen and paper and there were a lot of hands-on activities in the classroom. When virtual learning was

brought to Linda's attention, she immediately started brainstorming options for preparing her students for virtual learning. She also tried to figure out how she would still be able to teach them effectively. Linda immediately started putting folders together for her students to take home. Linda's students did not have chromebooks at that time, but the school district would soon distribute them to each student. Therefore, all her students later received chromebooks and they were hand delivered to each student's home. Linda also made a spreadsheet with all their logins and passwords. She stapled that information to each student's folder for accessibility. Linda called all the parents of her students to inform them that the district was going to be virtually teaching students. Some of the parents were open to the ideas and there were some who were not.

During the first few days of virtual learning there was a lot of frustration and many meltdowns from students and parents. The students were not able to log into class and some parents were not sufficiently computer literate to assist them.

"There were a lot of tears, a lot of crying, a lot of parents yelling, parents texting, parents feeling overwhelmed. I think it was more stressful for the parents. Especially if they had more than one student at home."

Linda believed having her students on the computer for such a long period of time was not to their advantage. It was too long of a day. They had difficulties understanding concepts in person, and it was no easier virtually.

Challenges Faced

Teaching cognitively impaired students is a joy for Linda. Teaching her students face-to-face is much different than trying to teach them virtually. The students in Linda's class were used to a routine and that meant coming to school every day. Virtual learning was not a part of

their everyday routine, and the students had difficulties adjusting. The students were used to catching the bus to school every day and now they were learning from home. The students were not familiar with using a computer daily for their academics. Linda had difficulties trying to get her students to get their work completed. Going on the website that they were working on and getting them to stay focused was challenging.

> *"It was a little bit difficult because when you're telling a child to push the letter B and they don't know what the letter B is, um, a lot of time was spent on navigating the computer world."*

It was difficult and challenging to give the students directions because they could not follow multistep instructions. Directions were given one step at a time and repeated several times, and it is still not always understood, but Linda understands this is her population of kids.

Another challenge is that many of the homes had multiple children in the home and it created distractions for everyone. Linda had to try to keep her students engaged, while in the meantime she could hear the other siblings and their teachers in their classes. The kids were easily distracted and wanted to be a part of the other activities in their immediate surroundings. No matter how many times Linda would say pay attention, their attention was elsewhere.

Linda had technology concerns for herself and her students. She made the decision to purchase her own desktop because her MacBook had recently died. She had no plans on purchasing a new desktop; however, she didn't have anything to use at this point. Linda had WIFI issues at her home, and she had two children of her own that she was trying to make sure were showing up for their classes. Linda sometimes found herself at her neighbor's house to use

their WIFI because hers was not working properly. The WIFI for many of Linda's students was unreliable as well.

"The WIFI was terrible. It was a lot of the homes; um, I know sometimes they would just drop out of the meeting. And then they would have to come back, which would take even more time."

The WIFI at the students' homes was not reliable, which made teaching rough. Linda is not sure if it had anything to do with most of the world using WIFI all at the same time. Afterall, everyone was home, and everyone was utilizing WIFI (even companies for meetings), schools, just about everyone.

"It definitely wasn't reliable. And I don't know whether that was like a technology issue on like the district's end or just that everyone was working remotely. Adults, children, students, everyone. And then the reality is kids weren't necessarily on their chromebooks doing work. They were probably playing games on their cell phones which takes from the WIFI out of the house."

But having a poor connection was not necessarily just in the district Linda was working for. The technological world was not really prepared for COVID-19, just like everyone else. Linda became annoyed with how often the computers would lag. She would ask a student a question and then there was silence for about 2–3 minutes. Then she would have to repeat the questions, which was another 2–3 minutes of waiting. Linda would read a book to her students to try to keep them engaged and then ask them questions. The students would get bored and not respond. Linda had to rely on her students answering questions verbally because they did not know how to type their responses in the chat section, and they could not read (keep in mind everyone's IQ in the class was below a 70).

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Linda's teaching methods changed; after all, she had no say in the matter. All of Linda's students were given chromebooks to take home; however, Linda started to prepare packets for her students. The pen and paper method was what the students were accustomed to using daily. The student had difficulties logging onto the chromebooks in school; therefore, virtual learning was no different. They were also not good with using the touchpad. Their fine motor skills were not defined, which is why many of them have occupational therapy.

"There were no mice while the kids were home. So, they had to use their fingers on the touchpad, which was difficult."

Linda's district had purchased *GoGuardian*, which allowed Linda to help her students navigate their way through computers. *GoGuardian* allowed Linda to see what her students were doing from her computer and gave her the ability to help them navigate to the proper site. This means Linda had remote control of their screens and could get them to the proper site herself when needed.

Linda also relied on visuals for her students. Linda's husband made her a whiteboard and chalkboard because her students needed visuals. When the students were in person, Linda was able to sit with the students and point to things, put her fingers on things to help guide them or even model things. Linda found trying to adapt things virtually was a challenge. Linda found teaching her students math and science to be very challenging, so she utilized videos for the students. The difficulty with the videos was that they lagged and played very slowly. The videos were lagging a minimum of two minutes behind. Additionally, she would draw pictures for the students to help them understand.

"I need to draw pictures and I don't know whether that was very helpful to my

class. Let's just say I'm not an artist, but I tried. But it was to the best of my ability and

that's not my strength is drawing."

When some classes became too stressful, Linda would give the students a "brain break."

This is when she just allowed the kids to be kids. Sometimes it was too much to have the

kids just staring at the computer for hours at a time, so they needed a break to just "chill out."

Mental Health

Mentally, Linda was feeling overwhelmed and drained. She felt herself becoming

stressed, angry, and annoyed. After teaching her students virtually for one month, she felt like

June was not coming fast enough and it was only April.

"But of all the stuff was more stressful and aggravating dealing with the technology

issues, dealing with students that are frustrated because something that should take 5 minutes in

the classroom was literally taking over an hour. And I'm not exaggerating, it was terrible."

Linda recalls having nightmares over it because she was so stressed. Linda was trying to

do her best to adjust and get through it, but it really started to take its toll on her mental state.

Prior to COVID-19 Linda's life and teaching career was good. She enjoyed her life with

her husband and children. She loved going to work every day and teaching. She had a great

routine with her work schedule, her family, and being able to socialize with her friends. She was

very structured, but that has always been what she has needed to function. She loved and valued

having her routine, but during COVID-19 her routine was broken. She was off her routine and

the kids in her class were off as well.

Summary

Linda's description of her experience during COVID-19 highlighted her challenges teaching in a multiple disabled classroom setting with 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade special education students. Linda enjoyed going to work every day and following a structured routine. The routine was not only good for her but for her students as well. When COVID-19 brought things to a standstill her routine was broken, and it threw her and her students off. The students had some difficulties adjusting to staying at home and not coming to school daily.

Linda's struggle included trying to get her students to log into class every day when they were not able to read or write. The students did not know how to navigate their way through technology, and it was not easy for parents to always assist. The students and their families became frustrated, and it was overwhelming for everyone. Linda started to feel stress; she was drained and emotionally overwhelmed with how the pandemic changes everyone's lives so quickly.

Daile's Experience

> *"I think I was feeling like a dinosaur in the education department. I had always tried to stay up to date and current, but this was not in my wheelhouse. I really felt in a lot of ways like I was not meeting the needs of my kids and I take that very personal."*

Daile identified herself as a 62-year-old white female who has taught special education for over 36 years. At the end of the 2019–2020 school year Daile decided to retire. Daile worked for the same school district for her entire 36 years of teaching. Daile was not really ready to retire; however, teaching virtually made her come to that decision quicker than she wanted.

Daile recalls not having a lot of notification that her district was going to be teaching students remotely. She remembers having a couple days to prepare and get organized. The school

district was trying to adhere to COVID-19 protocols that were set in place while all the teachers were trying to supply the materials, they would need to take home for their selves in order to teach. Daile is not aware of the funding source for her school district. She reported working in an urban school district where many of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Daile truly believes the school district receives some sort of funding, but she is not sure.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

> *"I think that we were blindsided in a way because I don't think myself included, I just didn't think the world would shut down. You shut down for a week or two, but the United States of America shut down for a year. Are you kidding me! I didn't believe it! Wow!"*

Daile considers herself an old schoolteacher. She believes students should be taught in the classrooms in a building. When she was informed her district was going virtual, she was obviously concerned. Teaching students virtually is something that has never been done before and she was concerned how long this "virtual learning" would last. Daile had some overall concerns, and she was outspoken about how she felt.

When students did not show up for class there was a lot of accountability about reaching the kids, but Daile was not sure who this would fall on. When students did not show up, what were the expectations of the teachers?

> *"I had supervisors drop in on my classes to see if I was there or if there were kids."*

Prior to the disruptions of COVID-19, Daile was having an exceptional year. She enjoyed being Teacher of The Year, many of the younger teachers looked up to Daile, she was well respected by everyone, and she was well known in her school.

> *"I was selfishly basking in the glow of being Teacher of The Year and then COVID hit, and the floor fell out."*

Daile was also mentoring a new teacher and helping her find her way through the educational field. Daile was enjoying everything about her year, especially the kids. Daile's school year experience was wonderful, and she was enjoying every minute of it and not thinking it would be her last year of teaching. But in a very short time, things changed quickly, thanks to COVID-19.

Challenges Faced

Daile was not prepared to teach special education students virtually. She enjoyed coming to work every day and having the ability to interact with her students and coworkers. Daile found not having the ability to have personal contact with her students difficult. It was a strange feeling.

> *"Remote learning was a challenge, to say the least. If there's anything I learned after 36 years it's that special education kids need to be touched, and the pandemic made that a problem. 'Cause I'm old school but I like to see my kids. I like to touch my kids and I like to know they are there."*

Daile was trying to make a connection with students through the computer; however, some students were not receptive. She would try to find humor to keep the kids engaged, but it did not always work.

> *"I did all kinds of crazy things. I used to wear a different hat every day and try to have the kids guess what hat I was gonna wear. Whether it was a cowboy hat or an Easter bonnet, a baseball cap. I would do anything to get them motivated to show up for class."*

Getting kids to show up for class was difficult. Some kids did not show up for class and showed up for class but did not participant. They did not want to turn their camera on for

various reasons and Daile tried everything she could think of to get them to turn them on. Sometimes she was more successful than others but she did not give up trying.

Daile would be very concerned because she cared about her kids' well-being. Daile was also trying to address the students' emotional needs, although this was not in her area. Many of her students were scared; they didn't know what was happening. This pandemic was new for everyone so there were always a lot of questions. Some questions could be answered, and some could not be answered.

"It was hard to reassure, you know, a preteen, a young teen from a computer screen that everything was going to be ok."

Daile was concerned about the lack of support from technology. If a student's chromebook broke, who was going to repair it? How would the student be taught with no technology? When students had difficulties with their chromebooks in school, it was a whole process that sometimes took days for repairs. Some of the chromebooks needed repairs prior to COVID-19 and some kids owed fines for repairs. This was deeply concerning for Daile.

"If a chromebook broke, it was next to impossible to get it replaced in a timely fashion."

There were students with no WIFI, and some parents relied on using their phones for hotspots. This became an issue because some families had more than one kid in the home who was also being taught. The school district did offer families hot spots, the parents just had to be able to pick it up at the school. Some parents were not tech savvy and had difficulties trying to assist their kids with logging into their classes. There was also a language barrier for some students who had a Spanish-speaking parent. There was no one that could help Daile with interpretation when there was a language barrier. Daile sometimes had to rely on the students to help with interpretation.

"I was trying to get parents to understand how important this was, getting through the

bilingual issues and trying to help parents who were not tech savvy to get their kids back

on. The list goes on and on, really."

Daile was also concerned about whether many of her students were eating daily. She

knew many families relied on the school district to feed the students breakfast and lunch.

"Teachers know things like what kids aren't getting enough to eat at home and then we

always magically have some crackers and cheese from our lunch, or an apple that we could

tuck in somebody's book bag."

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Teaching virtually was new for Daile. She was not sure how she was going to conquer

this hurdle; she was not good with computers. All the students in the district were given

chromebooks to log into their classes. Virtual learning was not only a challenge for her but also

for some of her students. Some of her students were not tech savvy and struggled face-to-

face. Daile's philosophy was that just because the school district supplied a chromebook to

everyone does not mean all the students are familiar with how to use them independently—

especially some special education students.

"Unfortunately, special education teachers know not all special education kids like

chromebooks. They are not always tech savvy. They click on things, and they don't click

on the right things, and they don't know their passwords."

To make a better connection with students and support them, Daile would make visits to

her students' homes. Daile's class had a range of 10 to 15 students. She was not concerned about

the safeguards of COVID-19, but educating her students was important to her, so she made every

effort she could to connect with them.

"I mean I was showing up at kids houses and trying to give them pointers from their

driveways. Some of the kids that weren't showing up in class, I was teaching them from

their front porches."

Mental Health

Mentally, Daile was not prepared for teaching her students remotely. She thought this

was such a poorly constructed way to teach kids, especially special education students. She could

feel the stress building up:

"I was having my own personal tug of war. Knowing that this was my only open avenue

to instruction and knowing this was the worst possible way to instruct special education

students."

Daile felt stressed and was upset because she felt like her kids were slipping through the

cracks of the education system. At this point she was starting to feel inadequate. She felt like

everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. She was stressed about trying to connect with the

kids, trying to reach the kids that were not showing up for class, and trying to get parents to

understand the importance of their kids showing up to be taught.

Daile also felt a high stress level because during this time she was concerned about her

own physical health, as well as that of her 85-year-old mother, who was terrified of the

pandemic. Daile was trying to do her best to keep her mother calm, but it had a ripple down

effect on her as well. She was not able to see her mother as she had in the past because of all the

restrictions that were set by the health department.

Summary

COVID-19 for Daile was very challenging on many levels. Because she had been

teaching for over 36 years, teaching students on a computer was something she never thought

would happen. Nonetheless, it became reality when COVID-19 impacted her school district and restrictions were put into place.

Daile believes she had so much more to offer the students in her school district but felt like the pandemic pushed her into an early retirement. She missed all the final goodbyes she would have had at the end of the school year. After dedicating her entire life to teaching Daile felt she did not have the opportunity to close the book the way she wanted to. COVID-19 took that option away from her. She was very angry about it and let everyone know. Daile wanted that last opportunity to turn the lights off and close the door on her own terms. That was taken away from her.

Amelia's Experience

"It almost looked like a left-behind scene. You go in and everything is just the way you left it. We left in March 2020, and I remember going back in June 2020, and I still had my half-eaten apple on my desk."

Amelia identified herself as a 52-year-old African American female who is in her 21st year of teaching special education students. Amelia has been in the educational field for over 24 years. Amelia decided to get into teaching special education because she had a special needs child of her own, and she had a brother who was learning disabled. Amelia also lives in the same city where she taught during the pandemic. During COVID-19, her school district resorted to virtual learning in March of 2020. During this time, she taught resources pullout and inclusion ELA for the 6th grade. Amelia worked in an Abbott school district which means her school district received federal, state, and local funding.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

> *"We were all just thrust into it. The students and the teachers. So, it was a learning*
>
> *curve. How do you plan for a pandemic?"*

Teaching special education students virtually was one of the most challenging

experiences Amelia has ever encountered. Amelia remembers hearing undertones chatter of

school shutting down but never really heard anything official until a Thursday or Friday through

an email. Amelia thinks she probably was one of the last individuals to know. Initially there were

not a lot of directions coming from anyone.

> *"It was a lot from the rumor mill but coming directly from the administration, not much*
>
> *direction, nothing solidified until we were out."*

Amelia was trying to wrap her head around what was about to take place and she had to

admit she was not ready. Although Amelia has been a teacher for many years, this is a lesson she

was not ready to teach or learn herself. Amelia was quickly trying to figure out how her years of

teaching in person were going to successfully transition to virtual teaching. And for all she knew,

her job was still to educate her students to the best of her ability. Although Amelia had never

experienced virtual teaching, she made it the best experience she could for the students. Amelia

was not sure what exactly to expect but everyone was in the same boat. This was an unexpected

situation for everyone, and there was no reason to take a negative attitude about the entire

situation, so Amelia did everything possible to make it a positive experience.

Challenges Faced

Amelia found preparing for virtual learning to be a challenge, especially because of the

quick turnaround. We were told on a Thursday or Friday and that Monday, "we were live and in

living color virtually." The district provided the student's chromebooks but Amelia wondered if that was enough. Special education students required more than just a chromebook.

"*Special education students need one-on-one or perhaps even hybrid schedule.*"

One of the biggest challenges for Amelia was the technology piece. The WIFI connection was terrible—it was not stable, and it lagged a lot. Amelia believed there was not enough capacity for everyone to be on virtually at the same time. There were times when she was instructing students and the WIFI would lag—it was not a good set-up, and students' responses were delayed.

"*The lag was probably the worst part. If you were not kicked out, you needed to log off and wait a few minutes to reconnect to try to re-establish a better connection.*"

As a teacher, it was not good to have to log off when the students were present. Suddenly, as a teacher, there you were, then frozen, and then kicked off. Amelia equated this to a teacher leaving the class and students wondering what just happened. Amelia found that sometimes the internet lagged less if some of the windows were closed and if students just used their emoji. This was not the perfect plan, but it worked sometimes.

Teaching students with special needs virtually was a challenge, especially those with ADHD. Trying to keep their attention and keeping them on task from a computer was overwhelming and seemed impossible some days. The students had so many distractions at home it sometimes seemed impossible to teach because Amelia was constantly redirecting students to get focused and pay attention.

Amelia had concerns for all her students but was especially concerned with students who did not live in stable homes. During the first week of virtual learning, Amelia worried about the students she knew were going to have a difficult home life.

"Um, my biggest concern, personally, was kids in an abusive situation. Being stuck all day and night with an abusive parent, boyfriend, and granddad."

She was also concerned with the students who relied on breakfast and lunch from school. She knew when school was in-person these students were eating at least twice a day. The parents didn't have to worry financially about supplying these meals, which helped. When everything went virtual, eating daily became a worry for some. Amelia was delighted to find out that her district later realized the importance of eating as well. Amelia's district arranged for parent pick-up once per week. The parents were able to pick up breakfast and lunch for the entire week for their household.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

"We had some general education students who obviously were not doing well. So, could you imagine that three times as much for special education students and their teacher?

The teaching strategies and methods Amelia was accustomed to using in person were not what was working for her virtually. Amelia's teaching methods changed "significantly," she really had to switch things up a lot. Teaching students in person is much easier emotionally and mentally. Amelia enjoyed seeing her students and she believed she was able to evaluate their needs better in person than virtually.

"If I can see my students that gives me a better assessment of how well they are getting information. How well they understand me. I can read their body language."

Amelia would enjoy going around her classroom touching her kids when it was face-to-face. She would hug some of her students, rub their backs a little, and let them know they were in a safe space in her class and in school. The students also missed the ability to socialize with their peers daily. Everyone was always on a computer screen; their conversation was limited, and they

really did not know how to interact with one another. Some had their cameras on, and some had them off. You really didn't know who was there on the other side, listening. Amelia was not able to build the same type of rapport with the students virtually that she had in-person. Some of the students would leave their emoji on all day and they would leave the class whenever they wanted and there was absolutely nothing Amelia could do about it. This left her feeling inadequate and powerless to some extent.

As a teacher Amelia had to figure things out quickly. She had to find the best resources to use for her students and resorted to researching best practice and methods for teaching online. She was aware she had visual learners and kinesthetic learners but the odds of reaching them virtually were not in her favor. Amelia tried to conduct as much research as possible to find any resources that were compatible with the platform the district was using.

Mental Health

> *"So, getting up in the morning and showering, putting on clothes and putting my face on a screen in the middle of my anxiety and some other things I had going on, I wasn't in a good place."*

Hearing about a pandemic and living through it is a story to tell. No one really knew what COVID-19 was, however everyone found out rather quickly. It was new to everyone, and everyone was stressed out about it and mentally unprepared. Learning how to navigate the world seemed impossible. Mentally this was such a challenge and was very hard for people who are used to being social, especially Amelia. At the onset of the pandemic Amelia was going through her own personal situations and COVID-19 just added to it. She found herself trying to put on a happy face for the students, while trying to calm herself daily and remain calm during

instructional time was difficult. Amelia was trying to hold it together for herself and the students she was teaching.

> *"I was trying to keep calm because now people are dying, and the kids are afraid. You're afraid and I couldn't even really give them much emotional support because I couldn't and didn't want to lie to them."*

Amelia was going through depression and suffered from anxiety. It appeared that the anxiety and depression got louder and louder as COVID continued. Being isolated from everyone did not help any of her symptoms. Amelia was trying to find her way every day through this crisis. Amelia sought out therapy to help her navigate her way and it was a great decision.

Prior to COVID-19 Amelia's life was pretty good all-around but during COVID it felt like my life was on fire. Amelia had anxiety that she seemed unable to control.

> *"That anxiety piece, like my world, was anxiety. My own personal anxiety, my professional anxiety, it was tough. Post COVID-19, the anxiety is still looming behind me. It's getting better but it's still there.*"

Summary

Amelia's narrative regarding her experience highlighted challenges she faced during COVID-19, including the quick turn-around, mental health issues, and not having the ability to establish a great rapport with her students.

Amelia found educating special education students virtually to be challenging, and she was not ready for the experience she was about to adventure into. Amelia's school district gave her very little time to prepare to teach her students virtually. This caused some stress because there was not a lot of guidance on how this was going to occur in just a matter of days. Amelia

tried diligently to educate herself on the best approaches to educate students virtually, however

she continued to run into some barriers. Technology, such as poor connection with WIFI, caused

major disruptions and distractions with educating the students.

Amelia also disclosed how depression and anxiety impacted her life during the

pandemic. Amelia found herself trying to put on a happy face daily so her difficulties would not

transfer to the students. The students were already dealing with the pandemic, and she did not

want to add to their concerns. Amelia felt isolated and could not pull herself out of the

depression or anxiety, so she sought professional help. Amelia realized that her symptoms were

not getting any better and she did not want to keep struggling inside.

Kim's Experience

Kim identified herself as a 27-year-old white female who is in her 4th year of teaching

special education students. When COVID-19 came to the world's attention, Kim was in her first

year of teaching. Kim had been teaching for a total of seven months when everything started to

manifest. During COVID-19, Kim's school district went to virtual learning as of March of

2020. During this time, Kim taught inclusion science and social studies for the 7th grade. The

school district in which Kim was employed received Title I money from the state of New Jersey.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Teaching during COVID-19 was an experience Kim will never forget. Because she was a

new teacher, she was still feeling her way through the whole teaching experience and dealing

with COVID-19 was not a part of her first-year plan. When she found out the district decided to

begin virtual learning there was no true plan in place in her opinion. Everything seemed to be

more trial and error. The students were given chromebooks, and the teachers were expected to

teach the students as if they were in the classroom. This really seemed like an impossible task,

but Kim gave it her best shot. The WIFI appeared to be an issue for many of the students, so the district was able to supply households with WIFI and hotspots, which helped tremendously.

The teachers were required to set up their classrooms through the Google domain. Kim had no experience with using Google at all. The lack of experience with both teaching and the Google platform was an overwhelming feeling.

"Google is the domain that we're using to teach our students, and you're going to have to train yourself on that platform."

Thus, in addition to not having any experience teaching middle school students, Kim also had no experience teaching virtually or using Google, so she relied on some of her coworkers to assist her. Kim believed she had good support from her 7th grade team. They were supportive and guided her through the process of teaching in general.

Challenges Faced

Technology was not a major concern for Kim. Kim was happy she was a full-time teacher and was willing to work through whatever challenges she faced. She was technologically inclined, and she was eager to get her teaching career started. Technology appeared to be the easy part for her, but Kim still felt overwhelmed by the sudden changes. Kim had her own laptop, and she was familiar with how to navigate it. But Kim did not want her students to be more knowledgeable than she was about using the computer, so she took extra time to get familiar with the *GoGuardian* program that the district had purchased. The students were definitely more aware of how to navigate their way through the computer and how to prevent her from seeing the different sites they were on during instructional time.

One of the biggest challenges for Kim was not having the true ability to follow the students' IEPs. Kim was disappointed she was not able to make sure her students were receiving

the proper accommodations and modifications that were in their IEPs. Virtual teaching was even more challenging for students who were hands-on learners and needed face-to-face learning. Kim understood how to implement their modifications when the students were face-to-face; however, being in a different location was not to the benefit of the students. Because of virtual learning, many students did not receive the modifications and accommodations they were entitled to.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

> *"My teaching strategies changed drastically. I found it harder to reach and implement the proper accommodations and modifications through the computer screen."*

Kim realized quickly that she had to make changes to meet her students' needs, but she didn't know how. After all this was her first year of teaching and COVID-19 hit the world like a ton of bricks. The teaching profession was new to her; she needed a lot of direction and was still being mentored. Kim relied on the assistance of her peers to figure out the best methods to reach the students. She used a small group setting by making break-out rooms. This helped the students because there were fewer distractions, and she was able to reteach lessons. Kim also modified their homework, classwork, and tests. Some of the student's assignments, tests, and classwork were reduced; however' Kim ensured they understood the concepts overall.

Mental Health

Kim started out the school year very excited and eager to get her career started. The first few months of teaching were great. Everything was going well, and she was starting to get the hang of things. Kim remembers the moment this changed for her. Mentally, Kim recalls feeling depressed and anxious. Kim was not comfortable and started to feel different about teaching mostly because it was virtual. Kim was new to teaching and didn't want the administration to

think she was not doing her job. Kim was anxious about the inconsistency of the internet and how she would teach the students if her WIFI went out.

"Am I gonna encounter some technological delay? Or are my students going to have any issues with getting on the chromebook? Am I gonna see my students today? That sort of anxiousness is what I felt."

Depression is real when you are not able to socialize as you have in the past. Kim was young and enjoyed spending time with her family and friends. COVID-19 took away her ability to go out and be social with anyone. She felt alone and sad inside and she did not like feeling that way.

"It was just me in my house talking to a screen."

There was no real social interaction with people, except for more computer screen conversation. Kim was used to going out, hanging out with friends and seeing her family often.

Prior to COVID Kim felt the world was such brighter, safer and afforded her an easier life. She had a great personal routine, and she didn't feel like life was a struggle. During COVID-19, she could feel the struggle of getting a simple task completed.

"It's hard to describe but I felt like I was on autopilot, and I felt as though there was no joy in teaching or in anything outside of my profession."

Post COVID-19, things started to slowly return, and some joy came back into Kim's life. Although things returned to some sense of normalcy, some things did not get back as quickly as Kim wanted. When school returned to face-to-face learning, the students and staff had to wear masks when they returned to school—that was an ongoing ramification of COVID-19. When anyone coughed or if a person was out sick for a long period of time, Kim's mind

wondered. COVID-19 would immediately come to her mind, and she did not like assuming the worst.

Summary

Kim's narrative regarding her experience during COVID-19 tells of an experience she will never forget for her first year of teaching. Kim's experience was a memorable one to say the least. She faced major challenges of being a first-year teacher, trying to find her way through virtual teaching and suffering from depression and anxiety.

Everyone will always remember their first year of teaching, but Kim's experience was far from the norm. This experience will be embedded into her mental consciousness for years to come. Kim started to make her way through her first year and was having a great experience. After seven months of teaching in-person, she had to find her way to teach the same students virtually. One of Kim's biggest challenges was learning to utilize the platform her school district was using. Although it was new, she understood this was the path she needed to take. Kim made the necessary adjustments to meet the students' educational needs.

Kim also battled depression and anxiety. This battle was expected, but Kim had to find a way to get through everything all at once. Kim missed spending time with her family and friends. She was young and used to going out. All the things she was used to stopped in an instant. In the end, Kim was able to resume face-to-face teaching; however, there were some protocols set in place that everyone had to adjust to as well. Overall, Kim was happy to return to in-person teaching.

Rebecca's Experience

"I wish, especially with students who have learning disabilities, that there could have been a little bit more leeway. I wish we could have been in the building."

Rebecca identified herself as a 32-year-old white female who has been teaching for a total of 8 years. Rebecca is in her 4th year of teaching middle school special education students. During COVID-19 Rebecca taught 6th grade pullout for math. Once Rebecca's school district informed the teachers they were going virtual, they were given time in the mornings, during their prep and planning time, to start to prepare their materials to take home.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Teaching virtually was a learning curve for Rebecca. Although Rebecca was somewhat familiar with technology, teaching students virtually was something she had never thought she would experience. Rebecca's school district was virtual, which required her to teach students all day on the computer. The school district gave the students chromebooks and used Google Classroom as their platform. Rebecca had to improve her technological IQ to be successful. She was not prepared to teach students virtually, but she gathered her thoughts and prepared herself as much as possible mentally because she refused to let this beat her.

"I did go out to purchase more technology so I could have multiple screens open so I could be more on top of them."

COVID-19 was a new challenge for the teachers and students. Rebecca met with a lot of students after hours to try to help bridge the educational gap. Students were not grasping the material as easily as they did with face-to-face instruction.

"A lot of my extra teaching activities were pretty much meeting with students after school hours for a little bit more extra help."

Rebecca was also concerned with the students' social skills; she could see them diminishing right before her eyes. Although the students were able to see each other on the computer, the social interactions were different—there was no engagement with one another.

When students are face-to-face, they joke and play with one another. They laugh, giggle, and be silly just socializing about nothing. This was not the case with virtual learning; no one really knew how to interact with each other over the computer.

"A lot of the time they were communicating over the computer, via text messaging, or in the chat with each other, but it was different. So, I felt like a lot of their social skills and their social cues went out the window."

Challenges Faced

Because Rebecca is accustomed to working with students with IEPs she was aware she had to try to figure out how she could implement their IEPs virtually. When Rebecca is teaching face-to-face, everything is at her fingertip within the classroom.

"I had to take what would be face-to-face and try to bring it into a digital age. I felt like all the strategies I would use in the classroom kind of had to go out the window."

When students would have difficulties, face-to-face Rebecca would use close proximity to help them get focused, whereas over the computer she could not do that. Rebecca also did not have the ability to physically go over to a student and stand directly next to them, giving them a pat on the shoulder to redirect them to get focused. Rebecca was also able to comfort students if they were having a bad day or needed to talk privately.

"I couldn't give somebody a hug if they were having a bad day, or I couldn't get one myself if I was having a bad day. Um, so I feel like during COVID my light kind of dimmed."

Rebecca found it challenging for students to come to class and show their faces. She was not always sure if a student was actually sitting on the other side of the computer or not. Some students did not turn their cameras on and some just left their emoji up the entire instructional

time so there was really no way to tell. Some students and parents also viewed allowing cameras in their home as a violation of their privacy.

"I would say, hey, I haven't seen your screen move in a few minutes. Are you still with us? Did you get an answer: What was the answer for the last questions? I've called on you 23 times, are you still there?"

Trying to get the students to fully engage in the class was hard. All Rebecca could do was ask for their involvement. Some students complied with the request, and some did not.

Another challenge for Rebecca was the poor internet connection. Although many of the students had hotpots given to them by way of the school district, the services would still cut out, causing disruption to instructional time. Many students used poor internet reception as an excuse leave class and not return for the remainder of the day.

"I would be in the middle of teaching and sometimes they disappeared for the remainder of class. Their response would be "oh my internet is out."

Because of the disruptions, some of the lessons would take longer to teach because the internet service would go out. Rebecca had to start over, and she was not sure what part of the lesson the students had missed. Sometimes Rebecca was not sure whether there were internet issues or students were just arriving and leaving when they wanted.

"I had some students who would log in 15 to 20 minutes late. Some logged on as we were leaving the classroom at the end of the period."

Some students did not complete any assignments, and parents did not understand why their child was failing or their grades were low. It appeared that there was no accountability from anyone in any area educationally. Rebecca tried to address this concern; however, it seemed as though no one was listening, and it caused some frustration.

Another challenge was how to keep the students' attention and keep them involved. There were too many distractions at home. When the students are face-to-face there are distractions; however, they are not at the same level as in someone's home and the distractions are limited. The students' focus is on the teacher and no one else or what is taking place in the classroom, for the most part. When students were virtual, trying to keep them from the distractions was a lot of work. The teacher could tell that the students who had their cameras on you could see that they were occupied with other things.

> *"Students were distracted by the television, their siblings running around, their cell phones, video games and more."*

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Students were supplied with chromebooks and if they needed WIFI, they were given hotspots by the school district. This was beneficial for many families who had no other alternative for internet service.

> *"Students and families were able to get hotspots so they could log in, but even with the hotspots a lot of people were using technology during COVID, so WIFI wasn't necessarily always consistent."*

There were additional resources in place for Rebecca's school district that were beneficial. The platform that Rebecca school district used digital textbooks. This was very helpful because it gave the students a sense of being in the classroom.

> *"Our textbook is digital, so we could use and still use the textbook programs and be able to project them through the Google Meet as well."*

Rebecca's school district also used the *GoGuardian* program which allowed the teachers to monitor whether the students were on the correct platform.

"GoGuardian program is a system that gives teachers insight into their computer where

we can see what they're looking at, what tabs they have opened as well as be able to

redirect them and control what they have access to during our teaching time."

Mental Health

"I felt completely frustrated most days. I like to be around people. I like to talk to

people. That was not possible! I need to be with people"

When virtual learning first started, Rebecca had a positive attitude. She was ready for the

challenge! As the weeks went by, Rebecca's eagerness started to fade, and she did not like being

stuck at home. She started to feel like she was not equipped to do her job and then she started to

feel overwhelmed. Rebecca struggled as a teacher she had ADHD herself. Rebecca found it

challenging to stay focused at times. She had many distractions in her own home.

"You know as somebody who has ADHD, it was hard for myself to keep and stay focused,

let alone keep the kids focused."

Prior to COVID-19, Rebecca reports living a very happy life. She felt good about herself,

and she was outgoing. She loved hanging out with her family and friends. She loved her job, and

she loved having her students around her. During COVID-19 she didn't like having to teach

students from a screen. Rebecca felt as though the pandemic dimmed her light. Post COVID-19,

Rebecca feels as though some things got back to normal; however, some did not. When the

students returned to school everyone had to wear a mask. That was not how things used to be,

and that took some getting used to for the students and staff. Rebecca was still having difficulties

identifying people because of the masks. The kids also had adjustments because they really

couldn't recognize their teacher. The students were also cautious—when another student

coughed in the classroom others, would make comments that the person had COVID-19.

Rebecca also admits that she was on edge too when a student would cough, sneeze, or be out for a day or so.

> *"You've got a cough, you know. Have you been to the doctors? Are you taking care of yourself? Are you medicating? Are you getting medication? Are you sick?"*

Summary

Rebecca's narrative regarding her experience with COVID-19 was filled with the challenges such as not being able to meet the students' educational needs per their IEPs, getting the students to stay focused and engaged, and dealing with her own battle with ADHD. Rebecca had a very hard time meeting the students' needs per their IEPs. All the IEPs are designed based on in-person learning and not virtual learning. Rebecca had to learn to be creative with her teaching to make the students successful.

Rebecca did her best to get the students engaged and to stay focused, but some had no interest in learning virtually. Some students would use a poor internet connection as an excuse to either leave class early or not come at all. Rebecca had no proof that their internet service was not interrupted; however, it seemed to happen more often than it should have.

Rebecca could truly relate to how many of the students found it hard to stay focused over the computer. Rebecca self-disclosed how she has ADHD and some days she had difficulties staying focused and on task. Rebecca had distractions in her home also, so she understood how the students were feeling about not staying on task, especially during instruction time.

Theresa's Experience

> *"COVID-19 really stressed me out in general and then adding teaching and trying to be there for the kids was stressful and caused me to have anxiety."*

Theresa identified herself as a 33-year-old Puerto-Rican female who has been teaching for a total of 10 years, including being a long-term substitute. Theresa has been teaching special education students for six years. During COVID-19, Theresa taught 7th- and 8th-grade inclusion for ELA. Theresa is aware her school district receives Title I funding to help support the district with state and grant money. This allowed the district to utilize money for tutoring programs after school and help support the salaries of teachers working in the district.

Teaching Experience During COVID-19

Theresa recalls teaching during COVID-19 was a lot to take in when she first heard about it. Then, when Theresa heard her district was going to teach students virtually, she immediately thought about how this had never happened before. How would her students be able to grasp concepts over the computer when they had difficulties grasping concepts face-to-face. Theresa was starting to put a plan in place to prepare for this new challenge. Theresa was prepared with her own technology because she had just recently purchased a new MacBook. She just had WIFI issues within her home.

"I would try to sit in certain spots in my house where the WIFI seems better."

It was helpful to know from the administration that the students and staff were going to follow their regular bell schedule; it would just be virtual. The students were required to log in to each period and have instructional time. Theresa's school district also implemented an intervention period at the end of the day to help students who were struggling.

"We had intervention period at the end of the day where students could come back and complete missing assignments or [have] extra time to work on specific stuff they weren't completing during class time."

This district used the Google platform for virtual learning to help monitor the students. Theresa was familiar with Google but not the platform for successfully teaching students, especially special education students. There was not a lot of time to truly prepare for this new way of teaching. As the directive came down from the administration, everything was based on the guidance they were receiving from the state of New Jersey and the health department. Then, it seemed like things started to move rather quickly.

> *"I think we might have had a couple of days, maybe a week, if that. I just know there was talk of this happening and then all of a sudden, we were out and not coming back."*

The teachers were instructed "*to take home what we thought was needed"* to teach students virtually. The district and administration were really trying to figure things out as quickly as possible, but it just was not a lot of time.

> *"I honestly feel there was not much sense of direction."*

Challenges Faced

One of the obvious challenges Theresa experienced was trying to get students to show up daily. Some students were home alone so there was no adult supervision there to monitor whether they were attending school. Theresa tried to use a variety of incentives for students to get them to show up for class and show up on time. It was not the best strategy, but it worked for some students. Some students would come to class knowing they were going to receive something, but at least they showed up.

> *"Some kids would show, and some kids would not. But if they turned in assignments I was posting, it would count for them."*

Teaching students with ADHD in-person can be challenging; however, just thinking about teaching the same students virtually was overwhelming for Theresa. She was not sure how

she would accommodate and modify students' work and how she would keep their attention, especially students with ADHD.

>*"They're hard, you know, to keep on task and focus and they require a lot of redirections.*
>
>*It's hard, especially like keeping them on task when they're at home.*

Theresa tried to keep some lessons short and give small breaks as a way to keep the students' attention. It would help them refocus, and kids with ADHD needed small breaks.

Boundaries became a concern as the weeks turned into months of virtual learning. There were no office hours for parents or students; everything seemed to run together. There did not appear to be boundaries because students and parents would call, text, email, or send Google Messages after school hours. Neither parents nor students understood the boundary lines and it became frustrating.

>*"Boundaries were definitely blurred and crossed. It was crazy. Some type of electronics*
>
>*was consistently going off with someone wanting to talk."*

Theresa found herself talking with students or parents while she was cooking dinner or just trying to have some down time with her family. Some parents would ask to be on Google Meet to discuss their child's progress or lack of progress. Some parents wanted to check on their children's grades. Because Theresa was home it did not always seem like work, but it was, and it was taking time away from her family.

Best Approaches and Teaching Methods

Theresa enjoyed teaching her students face-to-face; however, she was in shock once COVID-19 forced her school district to educate students virtually. One of the helpful tools that Theresa used was *GoGuardian*. This helped Theresa with keeping the students

focused. *GoGuardian* allowed Theresa to view her students' screens remotely to help make sure they were on task.

>*"This allowed me to privately chat with the students to make sure they are on task because a lot of kids didn't like to turn their camera on."*

There were times when Theresa would use *GoGuardian* and she could see the students not participating in class, but they were on some other websites, not paying attention or refusing to respond to any questions. One of the features of *GoGuardian* allowed Theresa to shut the computer down remotely. Eventually some kids found their way around *GoGuardian* allowing the teacher to see their screens. This is when Theresa learned how smart her students were with their computers.

Theresa enjoyed being able to use breakout rooms for her students to give them a smaller class size. This would also allow her to reteach students material imitating the face-to-face model. This was a challenge also because some students would not show up in the small group instruction, and then Theresa had to spend time trying to track them down, which took away from more instructional time. It sometimes seemed like a no-win situation.

Mental Health

To put it simply, Theresa thought COVID-19 was just stressful from beginning to end.

>*"We are going to wake up. We are going to do the same thing over and over, you know. You are not in the building. You are not with other coworkers. You are just alone."*

Mentally, Theresa found this to be a draining experience that she wanted to end quickly. Theresa was tired of sitting at the computer every day staring at the screen when some kids did not want to be there and didn't want to turn their camera on, while other students really tried to make the best of it. Those students who tried to make the best of it were the students who

presented as good students in-person. Some students logged on every day, while others may have logged on, but Theresa never saw their faces. They would not turn on their cameras and sometimes did not verbalize anything the entire time.

> *"You're just looking at all these little boxes with the icons for hours, how frustrating."*

Theresa struggled with anxiety during COVID. She would worry about her students getting sick, whether their families were alright, and about her own family. This pandemic was really taking a toll on her. Theresa was also exhausted because she was putting in more hours at home than she was when she was working in the building. The other teacher she was coteaching with constantly wanted to meet.

> *"It seemed like time wasn't a thing. It didn't matter if it was 10 o'clock at night, she would want to meet. I felt like I was constantly doing something school related and not having time with my family."*

Prior to COVID, Theresa was enjoying her life. She had just started working in her new district during the 2019–2020 school year. She was getting acclimated with the school, her students and her coworkers. She was trying to navigate her new position and understand the curriculum. Theresa also enjoyed spending time with her family, going out, being social and just loving the life she was living.

> *"Overall, I think my mental well-being was fine. I was happy just every day, living my life with my kids and my husband. And then COVID came, life was stressful."*

During COVID-19, Theresa tried to figure out life by working from home—how to effectively reach her students while keeping her family safe and healthy. Watching the news stressed Theresa out more so she stopped. Watching the news sometimes set her into a spiral; she could not handle all the deaths that resulted from COVID-19.

"We can't leave the house; we cannot see people we are used to seeing and keeping your distance from people is so hard. I actually refused to go to the grocery store at one point."

Post COVID-19, Theresa still has anxiety. When students start to cough, there are a million thoughts running through her mind. Some of the kids will yell out, "Oh, you have COVID." It just seems like COVID-19 is going to be a part of this society just like the common cold.

Summary

Theresa's narrative regarding her experience with COVID-19 was filled with challenges such as having difficulties with the WIFI, getting kids to participate in their classes, and trying to deal with anxiety and stress.

Just as with in-person learning, Theresa believes it was the parents' responsibility to encourage their children to show up for school. Although the classes were virtual, the students needed to attend school and take it seriously. Some thought children attending virtually might be a little easier, but it was not. The students who were good students in person were the same good students virtually.

The lack of stability for internet services was challenging because it interrupted instructional time. Some students would use poor internet connection as an excuse to not attend class or leave classes early. Theresa tried her best to keep the students engaged and encouraged the students to show up for school daily because their education is important.

Mentally, Theresa was not prepared for the onset of COVID-19. As a result of COVD-19, Theresa had stress and anxiety. This was one of the most challenging times in Theresa's teaching career. COVID-19 happened during Theresa's first year with her new school. She was still trying

to feel her way through her new surroundings. Then COVID-19 compounded the entire situation.

Results

Theme Development

As I gathered the data from the participant interviews, common themes formed and developed. There are several themes that were developed from this study. Some stood out more than others; however, the I started to discover the patterns. Some themes that were lightly touched upon were the lack of preparation for teachers, the possibilities of learning gaps for students, and no down time for the teachers. A few teachers also consistently expressed their concerns about students not having the two meals a day, the distractions at home that were overwhelming for the students, and challenging parents that could jump into the classroom environment without notice. The more obvious noticeable themes were the lack of social interaction, the overall ongoing technology issues, the difficulties of having students consistently attending school on a daily basis staying engaged and focused, stress, and anxiety.

Social Interaction

Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of students building relationships with one another because relationships mattered. Social interaction is important to growth and the development of students' social and emotional needs, especially during their middle school years. Unfortunately, there was a disconnect of social growth once virtual instruction started to take place. The participants noticed during the pandemic the students were not sure how to properly build relationships with one another through technology. There was a lack of peer interaction amongst the students virtually. The teachers could see that many of the students wanted to make connections and build relationships; however, this seemed to be a tough task to

complete through a computer screen. Some of the students had developed relationships with one another prior to the pandemic, however some were still getting to know their peers. There was no opportunity for students to socialize in the hallways while transitioning from class to class, there was no interaction on the bus ride to school, no lunch conversation, no sports activities to share with their friends and no clubs after school. Although students were present and could see one another, they were not socially engaged as they were with face-to-face learning. Many teachers attempted to foster social engagement however their plans were unsuccessful. For example, Debbie and Linda attempted to have virtual parties for the students. Linda would also allow the students to have "brain breaks." Linda stated how "I don't even know if brain breaks existed before COVID-19 or if that was just something that came from COVID." Although the teacher attempted to make the time into the students' schedules to socialize, the students had no interest.

Debbie, Kelly, Amelia, and Rebecca all shared their experiences of how they related to the lack of social interaction from students, coworkers, family, and friends. Kelly reported that one of the hardest things was "the lack of human contact." Kelly found that building relationships with her students made teaching easier, and during the pandemic she felt a disconnect. The lack of connection and the ability to develop relationships with her coworkers and students disrupted the flow and communication that helps evolve long lasting relationships. It was challenging to promote positive social interaction among students, colleagues, and family members virtually. Having human contact with others was essential for many of the participants. Daile, for example, shared that "the most difficult thing about teaching special education remotely is the lack of personal contact that the kids desperately need." The participants enjoyed and looked forward to interacting with their students daily when school was face-to-face,

unfortunately the pandemic prevented students and teachers from having human contact every day to having none.

Technology

This particular theme in my findings highlighted the ways in which technology played an integral role in the difficulties that made it challenging to successfully educate students. With the change from face-to-face learning to virtual learning, learning technology was unpredictable, inadequate, and there were lags and delays with the internet. Debbie, Missy, Kelly, Amelia, and Rebecca experienced many days when the WIFI caused delays or would lag during their instructional time. Because of unforeseen circumstances beyond their control, they all had to find ways to persevere and overcome the technology difficulties. Some days there was limited interruption, whereas other days it was almost impossible to teach an entire lesson successfully.

Some homes did not have WIFI; therefore, students were not initially able to be a part of their classes when virtual learning started. Many of the school districts stepped in and provided the necessary additional support, such as hotspots. Although many of the school districts provided hot spots for the students there were still noticeable lags and delays during instructional time. Some households dealt with more than one student learning in the home because the hotspot was being shared among multiple children. Teachers also had to deal with connections being lost, delays, or sometimes no connection at all for an extended amount of time. According to Linda, "my students would become frustrated and there were a lot of meltdowns." Many of the teachers had to encounter the internet being spotty, which hindered and interrupted instructional time. Some of the participants noted that while they were responsible for teaching, they had their own kids that needed to utilize WIFI at the same time, which caused some of the lags and delays in the delivery for everyone in the home.

Stress and Anxiety

All the participants in this study shared their feelings of how stress and anxiety impacted their lives. Prior research conducted by Mearns and Cain (20023) showed how teaching is a highly stressful occupation, and COVID-19 did not make the occupation any less stressful. Many of the teachers had obvious concerns about their mental health because of the increase of work demands, the uncertainty of educating special education students virtually, and the adaptation to new technology while educating students. They were also concerned about the possibility of their own family members contracting the virus and their own well-being. For example, eight out of the ten participants stated how stress and anxiety impacted them while teaching during the pandemic.

One of the major points that stressed some of the participants was the inability to meet their students' special educational needs as they pertained directly to their IEPs. Each day, there appeared to be a struggle to adapt their teaching skills to meet the needs of the students with IEPs. Debbie and Linda found themselves trying to adapt virtual lessons for students whose IQs fell below 60. Some of their students were autistic, cognitively impaired, and communication impaired. Hands-on activities were a major part of the daily delivery of their lessons. They often found themselves trying to examine and reexamine ways to effectively deliver their lessons to their students. They were stressed because they believed their students were not being educated properly because of the barriers of teaching virtually. When IEPs were written, the accommodations, modifications, goals, and objectives were developed and geared towards the students' needs in a face-to-face setting. IEPs were never written with addendums of "what if" students were being educated virtually. Because of this type of omission a trial-and-error process was implemented daily for many of the teachers. The teacher would try their best to develop

nonconventional ways of reaching their students. All the participants found themselves thinking outside of the box daily when developing lesson plans.

Stress and anxiety were also captured by Cassie, Kelly, Daile, Amelia, and Theresa as it related to family members. Cassie had to deal with her son's mental health because of other family members either getting sick or dying as a direct result of COVID-19. Cassie's mother got sick and died from COVID-19. Cassie discussed how "*my mother got COVID and passed away. It was just one thing on top of another. My uncle passed away from COVID. It was a very trying time. And my youngest son, who was home, started going into a really deep depression and developed anxiety because of his grandmother and uncle*."

Engagement and Focus

Teaching special education students virtually was an experience the special education teachers had never imagined, and yet it happened. Soon after virtual learning began, many of the teachers realized the expectations of keeping the students engaged throughout the day was very high; however, there was a disconnect with what was expected and what was actually taking place. Because of the classifications of the students, keeping them engaged and focused was very challenging. There were so many distractions in the homes that much of the students' instructional time was interrupted by their environment. Many students had siblings in the home that were being educated at the same time. Parents were in the home because everyone's jobs were closed. Some teachers experienced parents becoming engaged in the classroom during instructional time which was a huge distraction for the whole classroom. Teachers could overhear conversation among other people in the home, the television playing, and some related hearing and seeing something they should not hear or see.

Research Question Responses

Research Question(s)

The following research questions guided this study:

1. **How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe their experience teaching during COVID-19?**

Many of the participants in this study described their experiences teaching during COVID-19 as stressful and overwhelming. All the themes that were developed within this research caused some stress and anxiety to the participants; however, the one direct theme that ties into this research question is stress and anxiety. Stress seemed to have come from many angles in a short amount of time and it quickly became overwhelming. One of the stressors the participants related was the inability to meet the needs of their students according to their IEP. The pressure of having to educate special education students in a format such as virtual learning had never been done before, and it cause stressed and uncertainty regarding how to properly educate students without interrupting their educational learning process. Stress from teaching virtually was immediately felt by some participants, while some other participants related their stress to the snowball effect in that it had a long-lasting affect that is still felt at the present time. Some participants resorted to professional counseling while other participants were prescribed medication in addition to counseling as well to help alleviate some of their stress anxiety.

Within my findings, participants also associated their increase of stress and anxiety with their personal lives. Cassie had two family members pass away from COVID-19. Cassie's son then started to battle depression which impacted Cassie's well-being. Three of the participants sought out therapy because of their anxiety and stress levels. Debbie was stressed from having an infant and not having any support because of government restrictions. Some of the restrictions

that were set into place were travel restrictions, mask wearing indoors, social distancing, the reduction of large crowds of people indoors and limits on indoor gatherings. Stress and anxiety were continuous themes of many of the participants because of the restrictions.

Another level of stress and anxiety was associated with the theme of technology. The teachers experienced unprecedented challenges during COVID-19. The platform that was utilized was new to many of the participants and they were not knowledgeable or confident in using the platform to teach. Daile was in her sixties at the time of COVID, and she was not technologically inclined. Daile had no desire to teach students virtually; however, she found herself having to learn in a short amount of time. Daile relied heavily on many of the younger teachers for tutorials, advice and guidance about how to navigate through virtual teaching. There were moments when the teachers also experienced delays with the internet which hindered the instructional time with the students.

Finally, the themes of engagement and focus stressed many of the participants because the teachers spent time trying to figure out how to keep the students engaged and focused virtually. Missy recalled trying to find ways to strategize to ensure the students attended class daily. She had to find creative ways to keep their interest while making sure they were learning the proper material daily to meet the district's educational goals and outcomes.

2. **How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe the challenges they faced while teaching remotely during COVID-19?**

The teachers in this study faced a variety of challenges which cause some immediate stress, which is one of the common developed themes. When teachers first became aware of teaching virtually, they knew there would be some challenges; however, the magnitude of the challenges quickly became overwhelming. Some challenges were more difficult to overcome than others.

Teachers experienced households not having access to the internet; therefore, students were given hotspots. Although students were given hotspots, there were moments of poor connectivity.

Teachers also found it challenges in trying to keep the students engaged, in the inability to keep the students socially engaged with one another, in the lag and delays caused by technology issues, and in the lack of information that was given to properly prepare. There appeared to be a lack of guidance because virtual teaching for entire school districts had never been done before. Many was not sure of what this would actually look like. Although there was a plan on paper, putting it into motion while attempting to work out the kinks by trial and error was challenging.

Some of the challenges appeared to have a domino effect. Some challenges were easily to resolve while others were continuous from the beginning to end. Some of the themes mentioned were not consistent among all participants. These included the learning gaps in the student's education process, concerns for the students' nutritional intake, and the constant distractions within the students' homes. The most common and consistent challenging themes the participants described were the platform that was being utilized, actively engaging students daily, and the stress and anxiety the participants felt.

3. **How do special education teachers describe the best approaches or teaching methods utilized while teaching remotely during COVID-19?**

The teachers in this study were resilient about learning how to plan and prepare for virtual lessons that were once designed for in-person instruction. From the onset of hearing they would be teaching virtually, they knew their approaches and methods would have to change drastically from the norm of face-to-face teaching. One of the methods that changed for teachers dealt directly with the technology theme. Teachers had to immediately become familiar with online

technology, which is completely different from the teacher having the ability to walk to each student to ensure they are learning. Teachers had to learn to navigate a new platform before they could address any questions or concerns from their students. Linda and Debbie, for example, had to teach their students how to simply log on to the computer. Linda and Debbie had to develop step by step modules, some with pictures to help teach the students daily until they were able to follow their new routine. Developing this routine had to take place before any instruction could take place and everything had to be done slowly so the students could follow and understand the process.

Teachers had to also think ahead to change their delivery methods in their lesson plan when they utilized small group instruction and make the classes more interactive virtually. This ties into the theme of social interaction because the students were not able to sit with one another and learn to work together in small group. The teachers had to develop breakout rooms to provide small group instruction and also teach the students how to interact with one another to increase their social skills and also learn team building. The transition was also stressful for some teachers who were not familiar with how to properly navigate, develop, and implement breakout sessions for students. The social interactions with peers also changed among the students. Not having the opportunity to talk with one another, many students started to use nonverbal communication such as emoji's. Live conversation amongst peers were unfortunately replaced by avatars, emoji's, and group chatting.

The teachers supported each other and relied on each other to get through difficult moments of learning how to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of their special education students. Together the teachers discussed whether the learning outcome of the students would change. This created stress for many teachers based on the learning outcomes that are attached to

students' goals and objectives per their IEPs. Therefore, the teachers had to adjust the assessment modes to accommodate the needs of special education students. Learning activities had to be adjusted to meet the learning outcome for each student.

4. **How do special education teachers describe the level of change in their stress level, anxiety or depression while teaching remotely during COVID-19?**

Many of the participants in this study found their stress levels to be at an all-time high, while some others related to a milder level of stress. Prior to COVID-19, the teachers enjoyed teaching their students face-to-face and shared how they could see the growth of their students, but that was halted once virtual learning was in place. The theme of stress and anxiety is directly related to this research question and how in a short amount of time their joyous school year turned into a stressful year. Daile could not wait until the school year ended and decided to retire because of the level of stress she encountered. Daile was not willing to commit to a full year of virtual learning and was not willing to learn about technology after teaching face-to-face for 36 years.

Although all the participant reported some level of stress, three out of the 10 participants' stress levels were so high they received professional counseling, medication, or both to assistance with their stress levels. Debbie and Amelia continue to attend therapy daily and take medication although their school district is post COVID-19. There continue to be some lingering effects of COVID-19. Amelia recalled struggling every day to log into her class. She would, in a sense, put on a happy face; however, inside she battled with anxiety from the time she logged into class. Counseling allowed the participants to have support and help to navigate their way through the challenging times they were encountering daily. Having support themselves helped them to be of support to their students—something that was important to all of them. The

teachers knew they would only be at their best if they sought out the help they needed—otherwise their students would not be properly educated.

Summary

My purpose for this study was to understand the lived experiences of middle school special education teachers teaching remotely in the state of New Jersey during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter focused on each individual special education teacher and gave a glimpse of each participant's perspective. The teachers provided detailed insights and the researcher was able to capture their storyline of how their lives were impacted. Each of the participants expressed their challenges in detail by sharing their experience with me in an interview. After exploring the stories of ten special education teachers, their narratives revealed that all the participants encountered some challenges, some on a more difficult level than others; however, all their challenges were documented, and the data was analyzed. The obstacles and complications the teachers experienced varied from smaller-scaled difficulties to some major concerns across the board that truly hindered the delivery of instruction for special education students. I was able to identify many similarities among the teachers' responses and was able to show how each participant contributed significantly to this study. I acknowledged and examined their challenges to show how their experiences impacted their overall social-emotional well-being as middle school special education teachers personally and professionally.

Additionally, each teacher shared from their perspective the level of stress that was encountered, their degree of frustration, and the lack of training they received as they attempted to be successful in maneuvering their way through teaching special education students virtually. There were several highlighted themes that emerged within each special education teacher's experience. The themes and commonalities that have been identified provided insight

and some level of understanding into the challenges the teachers faced during this time. Some of the themes were minute topics such as the lack of down time teachers associated with working from home, the possibility of there being learning gaps with students in the future, and having to deal with a challenging parent that would interject themselves into the classroom during instructional time. A small number of teachers were also concerned about the number of students who could possibly not have enough food to eat at home because the family relied on the school district for breakfast and lunch. However, some of the most prominent common themes that were revealed by the participants were the lack of social interaction, the overall technology issues, the difficulties of having students consistently showing up for school being engaged and stress and anxiety. The most common themes that were developed from the data will be in more detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter Five: Conclusion
Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the institution of education on a level that could possibly have a long-lasting effect on students and teachers. Because of the severity of COVID-19, many schools had to close their doors, which resulted in school districts relying on virtual educating for students. I analyzed the impact COVID-19 had on middle school special education teachers in New Jersey. The stories given by the special education teachers provided insight into the challenges and experiences they encountered while teaching middle school special education students virtually. Moreover, through my study, I sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe their experiences teaching during COVID-19?

2. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe the challenges they faced while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

3. How do special education teachers describe the best approaches or teaching methods utilized while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

4. How do special education teachers describe the level of change in their stress level, anxiety or depression while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

In this chapter, I will present the major themes that were generated from the participants' narratives and link the study's findings to the themes presented within the literature. I will also explore the narratives and align them with the concepts that were developed as the theoretical framework. As I explore the themes of the participants, it will give researchers the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their experiences during COVID-19. I will discuss the implications of this study and the correlation it has with the literature and the research study's

questions. Finally, I will present recommendations for future research and implications that could assist other professionals who are trying to gain further insight into this topic.

Summary of Findings

The themes in this study provided a description of how the phenomenon of special education teachers' experiences impacted their lives. Participants in this study were able to provide detailed information based on the lived experiences they encountered during COVID-19. After analyzing the data from the interviews, I will discuss the factors that contributed to the most common themes reported by the ten participants in this study. I was able to analyze the data from the interviews and developed themes and common modalities from the participants' stories. Middle school special education teachers who taught special education students during COVID-19 in New Jersey were stressed and suffered from anxiety on different levels, some more severe than others. The teachers also encountered challenges that hindered their ability to deliver instructions to their students virtually. The participants in this study experienced a mixture of frustration, stress, anxiety, limited time and resources for preparation.

The following themes were developed from the data collected in the interviews. Theme One, the lack of social interaction, was a concern for the teachers dealing with students, coworkers, family, and friends. Theme Two, technology, the lack of training, and the lagging and delays. Theme Three, stress and anxiety that was identified as a direct result of teaching virtually. Theme Four, engagement and focus of the students being taught virtually. I found them interesting enough to mention in my results. Some of these other themes were, for example, were everyone's routines being interrupted, teachers having to adjust their learning styles because of teaching virtually, not being able to meet the requirements of the students IEPs, and

the possibility of future learning gaps. The participants expressed their concerns in those areas; however, the percentages were not as high as the other themes.

The participants also noted how their social interactions as adults were impacted. The participants lacked the social interaction they were accustomed to having with their students, coworkers, families and friends. They did not have the same productive collaborative meetings as they had in the past. The participants found themselves joining the Google meetings to help bounce planning ideas off one another; however, they were not meeting as often because everyone was exhausted from sitting on the computer all day teaching. Although the meetings were to collaborate and exchange ideas, it appeared as though the meetings were more geared towards a venting session for everyone. They primarily discussed how everyone was struggling daily to maintain, how they were feeling stressed, and not knowing what was next for them or the students. Usually, when they had team meetings face-to-face, everyone was joyful and happy to see one another. Everyone would come with great ideas that would be useful to their grade levels. Virtual meetings were the complete opposite. Everyone just seemed worn out, unmotivated, and discouraged.

Another prime example is Debbie. Debbie was a new mom and initially relied on her family and friends to help assist her with her first child. She enjoyed it when her family was able to come to her house to visit her and her son. They were all able to make memories during the first few months; however, that quickly faded. When restriction was set into place in New Jersey, the visitations stopped. Debbie quickly started to feel isolated and alone. She shared that "I had a newborn; I wasn't able to have any of the support that I needed because of restrictions. My husband was going and working." Because Debbie's husband was working, she was alone and was not able to have the support she dreamed of when she got pregnant.

Rebecca felt it was unsafe to go outside, so she stayed in the house every day. Missy felt isolated and missed collaborating with her coworkers about lesson plans and getting to know one another. Missy also felt as though she did not have the opportunity to interact with friends because of social distancing mandates that were in effect. One factor that stressed Cassie was the inability to separate work from home because it all blended together while she taught from home. She found herself working late, tutoring kids after school hours, taking parents' calls outside of the allotted work hours and sometimes reteaching students who had a difficult time catching new concepts during instructional time.

Another concern about technology was that the students were not able to navigate their way to the classes; they were not self-reliant. Prior to COVID-19, many of the students had little to no experience navigating their way to virtual classes. None of the students in Debbie's or Linda's classes were able to successfully log into their classes let alone find how to log into their virtual classroom. This aligned with the previous study conducted by Rice (2022), who noted that students had to learn to log into their classes and learn to participate in a space they were not accustomed to, which was virtual learning. The participants acknowledged that administrators did not keep in mind that some of the students were not able to read or write; therefore, they were not able to log on to their computers independently. For example, Debbie had to teach her students how to click on the basics necessities such as how to log onto the laptop, understanding their usernames and passwords, and using the correct alphabets and numbers to log onto the computer. Linda shared how "it was a little bit difficult because when you are telling a child to push the letter B and they don't know what the letter B is, a lot of time was spent on navigating the computer world." Many of Linda's and Debbie's students were not familiar with navigating a laptop because many of them were either nonreaders or beginning readers despite being in

middle school. Linda was able to make a spreadsheet of all her student's logins and passwords for herself initially. She then stapled each student's individual login and password to their specific folder and sent it home with the student their last day of school that was in-person in preparation of virtual class.

Participants also expressed their ordeal of becoming frustrated with the lack of training for staff on the platform their school districts were utilizing. Rice (2022), who discussed how teachers learned to use video conferencing in order to maintain communications because there were no other options but to learn, also noted this in a prior study. Participants shared very specific examples of how technology affected the delivery of instruction. Daile noted that, "I knew nothing about the platform, I'm old school." Daile had to rely on her younger coworkers and her daughter to help her navigate her way through the technology piece. Moore-Adams et al., (2016) discussed how teachers should be more knowledgeable about technology and how to implement it within the virtual environment. Amelia felt left behind and in the dark about technology. Amelia "did not know how to share her screen with the students to help share the lesson." Linda stated that "technology was new for everyone," and they were limited in time and had no preparation for themselves or the students for virtual learning. Linda found that for some students, "it was stressful and aggravating dealing with the technology issues. Logging onto the computer should have taken a minimum of five minutes in the classroom and was literally taking over an hour—and I'm not exaggerating." Some students had to rely on their parents or siblings to assist them daily. Another highlighted part of the technology piece was learning the platform the school districts had designated to educate the students. The teachers were only provided a few days at the most to prepare to teach online which resulted in a lot of trial and error. This did not give the teacher adequate time to learn the platform, understand how to accommodate special

education students academically, and teach the students to navigate their way through technology.

Debbie, Cassie, Missy, Kelly, Linda, Daile, Amelia, and Therese shared how stress affected their life and their well-being. This further supports the study conducted by Stapleton et al. (2020) who noted the direct association between stress and teaching. These participants needed to find a way to cope to get through some challenging moments. The level of stress and anxiety varied in severity with each of them, with some noticeably more affected than others. For example, Debbie, Kelly, and Amelia actively started engaging in professional counseling in addition to taking medication. For all three of these participants, this allowed them to gain some sense of control over the emotionally overwhelming feelings they encountered because of the pandemic. Debbie suffered from depression and anxiety and felt isolated. She experienced a high level of anxiety, and she did not leave her house. Debbie attended counseling and took medication as a part of treatment. She was also stressed about the students' inability to navigate their way through all the technological issues they encountered. Kelly experienced a high level of stress that resulted in her attending therapy as well. Amelia attended therapy and struggled to join her classroom because of the level of anxiety she felt. Amelia recalls the daily inner debate with herself about logging onto the computer every day. Some days it took longer to calm her anxiety, while other days it may have just a matter of a few seconds to get her anxiety under control. Amelia shared how "getting up in the morning and showering, putting on clothes and putting my face on the screen in the middle of anxiety and some other things I had going on wasn't a good place. It wasn't good for me. It was so much uncertainty district-wide, worldwide, country-wide, disease-wide." Some other participants identified the increased level of stress and anxiety which resulted in utilizing coping skills daily to manage their stress level. Although other

participants may not have attended therapy, they also indicated the high levels of stress and anxiety they felt.

Kelly dealt with her mother needing surgery during COVID-19 and their concern about her recovery. Because of the restrictions within hospitals, Kelly was not able to visit her mother. Daile was concerned with her elderly mother possibly contracting COVID-19 especially because she had some underlying health concerns. Amelia, Debbie, and Theresa felt alone and as though they did not have support, although they had a good amount of moral support and all they had to do was make a simple call.

Missy, Kelly, Daile, Amelia, Rebecca, and Theresa all related to the difficulties of maintaining their students' attention to keep them focused and engaged. The teachers understood the importance of keeping the students engaged, but there was no blueprint or manual of how to make this happen for the students virtually. Teachers were looking for the tools that would be beneficial to help assist with keeping the students engaged. Daile would go out of her way to keep the students' attention by doing silly things such as wearing different hats or having them guess the type of hat she would wear the next day to teach.

Discussion

Conducting this study enabled me to discover and highlight some areas of how the overall well-being of teachers was directly impacted during COVID-19. My purpose for this study was to hear from special education teachers teaching virtually during COVID-19 and identify some factors that hindered the delivery of educational materials to special education students. The researcher found that there was a significant change in the delivery and routines of how special education students were being taught by middle school special education teachers when changing from face-to-face to virtual learning with a short amount of time to prepare. Silva

et al. (2021) discussed how teachers were not in any way prepared for online teaching. A prior study by Winter et al. (2021) also made note of how virtual learning posed a challenge for teachers who were primarily trained to teach students face-to-face. These types of changes created many challenges for educators, students, technologies, and families directly. Previous research conducted by Daniel (2020) also acknowledged how COVID-19 caused a great challenge when the government replaced face-to-face learning with virtual.

My findings indicate that while teaching special education students, the well-being of the special education teachers was impacted daily because of the levels of stress, anxiety, lack of social interaction, technological difficulties, and the inability of students to focus.

The principal result of this study indicates that there was a direct correlation between special education teachers' stress and anxiety levels and teaching special education students virtually. This conclusion is based on the lived experience of the special education teachers who participated in this study. The level of stress and anxiety increased for those teachers, and it affected their ability to deliver instruction to their special education students. The researcher found that some of the stress and anxiety could possibly be reduced in the future if there was a more cohesive plan for educational institutions prior to another pandemic. The study will allow for greater opportunity for school districts to be more productive and successful when educating special education students.

Additionally, the findings of my study also suggest how school districts could prepare the teachers, students, parents, and the community by sharing a virtual plan. Having a plan in place will allow all the stakeholders to have knowledge of the plan readily available and be better prepared if mandatory virtual learning to the magnitude of COVID-19 was to ever occur again. A previous study conducted by Bendeck (2022) also discussed how teachers had difficulties

adjusting to educating students via new technology and not being prepared to teach remotely. With specific regard to special education students, there are some great suggestions that could be taken into consideration. Educating the general education students and educating special education students do not parallel one another and there needs to be distinct plans for the two populations. Toquero (2021) noted how teachers experienced difficulties finding new strategies that were appropriate and aligned with the curriculum for special education students. Although COVID-19 caused emergency closure of schools, school districts continued to be fully responsible for meeting the needs of special education students. There is a larger need to become more aware of, and specific about, how to meet the needs of special education students because of their specific needs that are indicated in each student's IEP according to their disability and classification. Teachers would have felt more empowered, according to Richards et al. (2018), if they were offered professional development to enhance their virtual experience.

Implications

This study contributes to the literature on special education teachers who taught special education students virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the special education teachers were impacted. For future research I include several recommendations to improve the literature about how special education teachers were affected overall. Future studies on this research will help other educational institutions to navigate their way to supply services to special education students, to reduce the amount of barriers that were encountered, and to reduce the level of stress and anxiety for special education teachers as it relates to teaching special education students virtually. I will also include recommendations for how school districts can better prepare teachers, students, parents and the community if virtually learning was ever

needed again in the future for any type of health crises that could impact the local, state, or national body.

My study was geared towards providing narratives from the perspectives of special education teachers about the challenges they faced teaching special education students virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. The insight that the participants contributed to the studies in the educational field to help educational institutions on any level teaching special education students. Educational institutions on any level, not just middle schools, will gain an advantage to help deliver a more productive way to educate special needs students, in addition to reducing the possibility of staff being stressed or having anxiety from being overwhelmed.

Delimitation and Limitations

This study had some limitations. First, the researcher took into consideration that this research only provided a quick snapshot of the participants. The pool of participants were all females. Unfortunately, there were no male teachers represented in this study. This was beyond the researcher's control, and having male participants included in the study would have been preferable. The snowball sampling included a number of male participants; however, they did not respond or reply to the initial email to determine if they qualified to participate in the study. Therefore, future studies should include a more balanced, probabilistic sample with regard to gender. Because of the limitations, the study did not include the perspectives of any male teachers or the diverse ethnicity of male teachers.

Another noted limitation was the small number of African American women represented within this study and only one participant who identified as Hispanic and White. Most of the participants in this study were white females. Although the researcher made every attempt to recruit a mixture of participants, white females responded in the time frame allotted for this

study. There was only one African American female participant within this study; therefore, this did not represent a fully diverse population. Because of the low number, this clearly did not allow the researcher to have a wide range of perspective from a more diverse population. The focus of this study was to explore the experience of special education teachers in the state of New Jersey; however, another limitation is that all participants were all teachers within one specific county in New Jersey. Although all the teachers were specifically from the same county, this was not intentional, but one county could not represent all the counties within New Jersey. Another county may not have shared the same experiences as the participants in the county represented in this study.

There are some strengths within the study that provide documentation about the increase in stress and anxiety among special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in the study related how stress and anxiety impacted their overall well-being. When the participants discussed their stories, they also shared some of their coworkers' feelings because the teachers shared their thoughts during meetings. The teachers would also share their frustrations about their experiences teaching virtually during COVID-19.

Recommendation for Future Research

Based on my findings in this study, I propose the following recommendations for educational institutions to set in place moving forward for emergency virtual education for special education students. My findings indicate that middle school special education teachers in New Jersey experienced stress, anxiety and a lack of preparedness in a time of a crisis because of many unforeseen obstacles the teachers had to overcome. Moving forward, I recommend ensuring that teachers have the proper mental health resources available to them by providing contact numbers and agencies available who are readily able to assist. I suggest this because the

teachers in this study revealed how stress and anxiety hindered their mental well-being and their ability to effectively educate special education students.

This leads to another recommendation—that an increase of technological resources and training should be taken into consideration to improve the effectiveness of the delivery of teaching. There needs to be a technology plan readily available for school districts. The implementation of professional development should be readily available to teachers so that there could be a reduction in stress, anxiety, and an increase in preparedness. My results provide detailed accounts of how teachers did not know how to properly utilize the platform their school district had designated to teach students. Ongoing professional development would enhance the teachers' ability to navigate independently through a variety of platforms and would be beneficial to the teachers and the entire school district. School districts would also benefit from strengthening the infrastructure, which includes the hardware and software, to have the ability to run programs needed if something similar to COVID-19 took place again, and virtual learning is the only options.

Conclusion

Because of the health crisis caused by COVID-19, many educational institutions were forced to close and find alternative ways of educating their students. School districts had to scramble to find the best possible way to educate students. When virtual learning was established by many school districts, they did not take into consideration how educating special education students would differ from educating the general student population. This awareness did not come into focus until virtual learning had already begun and teachers were expected to find their way through on their own with little to no guidance. Special education teachers had to quickly

transition from face-to-face education to educating students virtually with no direct instruction from administrators.

Once virtual learning started there was no time for teachers to make immediate adjustments to the delivery of instructions. Thus, teachers could not accommodate special education students' IEPs in such a short amount of time. Because of the short notice and rapid implementation of virtual learning, special education teachers were overwhelmed as they struggled to effectively educate their students and felt stress and anxiety. There were many reasons the teachers related to stress and anxiety; however, their mental health was impacted directly as a result of COVID-19. The participants also recognized how they faced the challenges of not being able to socialize with their coworkers, families, and friends. This seemed to impact their social needs as adults and confirmed that they, as well as the students, were affected by the pandemic.

Overall, my research shows how middle school special education teachers in New Jersey dealt with stress and anxiety while educating special education students virtually during the pandemic. The outcome of this study suggests the participants' mental health was impacted while they taught during the pandemic, leading some participants to seek professional counseling and medications. My findings also reported that there were some other mitigating factors that impacted and affected the delivery of instruction to middle school special education students. The results of my study can be a beneficial resource for future studies among special education teachers who are teaching or will teach special education students virtually.

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Appendix A

Research Questions

1. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe their experiences teaching during COVID-19?

2. How do special education teachers in New Jersey describe the challenges they faced while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

3. How do special education teachers describe the best approaches or teaching methods utilized while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

4. How do special education teachers describe the level of change in their stress level, anxiety or depression while teaching remotely during COVID-19?

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 4, 2023

Yolanda Henderson
Sarah Walsh

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-186 Middle School Special Education Teachers in New Jersey Teaching Virtually During COVID-19

Dear Yolanda Henderson, Sarah Walsh,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of

continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix C

Survey Questions

Read questions and mark yes or no for each item

This survey will assist to determine if you are eligible to participate in a study.	Yes	No	Additional Information
Middle School Teacher Survey			
Are you a certified special education teacher?			
Are you certified in the state of New Jersey?			
Have you been teaching special education students for less than 5 years?			
Have you been teaching special education students between 5-10 years?			
Have you been teaching special education students between 11-20 years?			
Have you been teaching special education students for over 20+ years?			
Did you teach in New Jersey during the 2019-2020 school year?			
Did you teach in New Jersey during the 2020-2021 school year?			
Did you teach middle school special education students remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?			
Did you have experience teaching remotely prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?			
Are you willing to voluntarily participate in a study if you qualify after answering the above questions?			

Appendix D

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Middle School Special Education Teachers in New Jersey Teaching Virtually During COVID-19.
Principal Investigator: Yolanda Henderson, Doctoral Student, Liberty University, School of Behavioral Science.

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a teacher who was teaching remotely during the time frame of 2019-2020 and/or 2020-2021 within the state of New Jersey. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

This study is designed to explore teachers teaching special education students in New Jersey remotely during COVID-19. Specifically, New Jersey was state mandated to implement remote learning during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. This study is to gain insight into how stress, anxiety, or burnout impacted teachers during COVID-19 and how it has affected the teaching profession within middle school special education teachers.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Keep track of the data; the data will be collected after the interviews are conducted.
2. Interviews will be scheduled after the survey has been completed. The participants will receive a Google calendar with the dates and times of the interviews or face-to-face interviews.
3. Participants will be informed that the interviews will be recorded to collect accurate data.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms/codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from the data in which you provided will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

The researcher Yolanda Henderson conducted this study. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Yolanda Henderson at ▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Sara Walsh ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that the human subject's research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations.

The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature

Appendix E

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale

DASS21   Name: Date:

Please read each statement and circle a number 0, 1, 2, or 3 which indicates how much the

statement applied to you over the past week. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend

too much time on any statement.

The rating scale is as follows:

0   Did not apply to me at all

1   Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

2   Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of the time

3   Applied to me very much or most of the time

_____

1   (s)   I found it hard to wind down   0   1   2   3

2   (a)   I was aware of dryness of my mouth 0   1   2   3

3   (d)   I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all 0   1   2   3

4   (a)   I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g., excessively rapid breathing,

               breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion)   0   1   2   3

5   (d)   I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things 0   1   2   3

6   (s)   I tended to over-react to situations   0   1   2   3

7   (a)   I experienced trembling (e.g., in the hands)   0   1   2   3

8   (s)   I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy 0   1   2   3

9   (a)   I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself

0 1 2 3

10   (d)   I felt that I had nothing to look forward to   0   1   2   3

11   (s)   I found myself getting agitated   0   1   2   3

12   (s)   I found it difficult to relax   0   1   2   3

13   (d)   I felt downhearted and blue   0   1   2   3

14   (s)   I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing

0 1 2 3

15   (a)   I felt I was close to panic   0   1   2   3

16   (d)   I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything 0   1   2   3

17   (d)   I felt I wasn't worth much as a person   0   1   2   3

18   (s)   I felt that I was rather touchy   0   1   2   3

19   (a)   I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertions (e.g.,

sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat)   0   1   2   3

20   (a)   I felt scared without any good reason 0   1   2   3

21   (d)   I felt that life was meaningless   0   1   2   3

Appendix F

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your response.

- 7 - Strongly agree
- 6 - Agree
- 5 - Slightly agree
- 4 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 3 - Slightly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 1 - Strongly disagree

_____ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.

_____ The conditions of my life are excellent.

_____ I am satisfied with my life.

_____ So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.

_____ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

    31 - 35 Extremely satisfied

    26 - 30 Satisfied

    21 - 25 Slightly satisfied

    20   Neutral

    15 - 19 Slightly dissatisfied

    10 - 14 Dissatisfied

5 - 9   Extremely dissatisfied

Appendix G

Ice Breaker

The interview will begin with an icebreaker. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), one of the most important steps in research is to find people to have access to and establish a rapport with them so they are comfortable providing data. The icebreaker that will be utilized will be based on key words or phrases the interviewer will have in common with the participant to set the tone. The researcher will individually become familiar with each participant. Once commonality has been established, the researcher will be able to engage in further conversation with the participant.

Appendix H

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What qualifications do you have to support special education students?

3. How long have you been teaching special education students?

4. What grade(s) did you teach during the pandemic?

5. How did your teaching strategies change during remote learning?

6. What type of funding does your school district receive to help support the district as a whole?

7. What was your school district plan for handling COVID-19?

8. Did your school district have the resources in place to educate students from home?

9. What was the timeframe you were given to prepare for remote learning within your school district?

10. What was the access to technology for students at home (i.e., chromebook or WIFI)? Was it reliable?

11. What other type of platform for teaching have you used in the past?

12. How prepared were you technology wise to educate special education students remotely?

13. How would you describe your strategies to keep students engaged in learning?

14. What was your method to keep the communication open with parents and/or guardians?

15. How well were you mentally prepared to educate students remotely? Please describe.

16. What mental health related concerns would you attribute to teaching students remotely?

17. Identify any additional stressors you have attributed to educating students remotely?

18. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a special education teacher, educating students remotely?

19. How did your administrative team prepare you for remote learning?

20. How would you describe the communication between you and the administration?

21. Did you receive a significant amount of support from the administration?

22. What is your age?

23. What is your gender?

24. What is your ethnicity?

25. What are your certifications?