The Experiences and Perceptions of Practicing Special Education Teachers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study examined special education teachers' perceptions and experiences as they transitioned to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there has been much research on preparing teachers to be effective in online environments, there is limited research on the teaching and learning dynamics when teachers are thrust into distance learning without training and preparation (Kormos, 2018; Moore-Adams et al. 2016; Unruh et al. 2016; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012). As described by Steele (1973), environments are affected by six functions: security and shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure, and growth. In a classroom setting, these functions work together to promote a learning environment conducive to transformative experiences. Participants in the study, five special education teachers, wrote three to five journal entries over a six-week period, with a focus on sharing their experiences. These journals were collected and analyzed via a phenomenological method. Textural and structural themes were uncovered, and as was the essence of the teachers' experiences. Findings demonstrated specific factors that promoted resiliency in teaching during a pandemic – special education teachers sought connections and relationships, they established routines, and looked to administration, peers and families for guidance and support.

Keywords

Author Bio

Marci Glessner, Ph.D., currently works at Minnesota State University Moorhead as a faculty member in the Special Education and Elementary Inclusive Education program areas. She serves as the graduate coordinator of the Special Education graduate program. Prior to MSUM, she taught at the University of North Dakota and in elementary schools where she held a variety of positions including: a special education teacher, librarian, reading specialist, second grade teacher and staff developer. Her experience with special education includes working with students with Learning Disabilities, Intellectual Disabilities, Emotional/Behavioral Disorders, and Autism. Shirley Johnson, Ph.D., has been teaching in the field of Special Education for thirty+ years. Prior to higher education, she taught in K-12 schools, working with individuals with DD, EBD, ID, and ASD in the elementary, middle and high school settings for twelve years. Dr. Johnson earned her Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning with a Teaching Emphasis from the University of North Dakota, December 2017. Her scholarly interests include the implementation of evidence-based and high-leverage practices, the use of positive behavioral supports and interventions, promoting interprofessional collaboration and co-teaching, and utilizing technology for instruction, collaboration, and data.

Introduction

Connection, at its most basic level, is what teaching is all about. Teachers connect with students, with parents, with other teachers, and with the community in which they teach. These connections are academic, personal, emotional – the foundation for education. Anyon et al. (2018) found "...supportive and genuine relationships are essential in creating a positive school climate, reducing problem behaviors, and lessening racial discipline gaps" (p. 222). For many students, a teacher may be the relational stronghold. When COVID-19 infections in the United States began to rise in the spring of 2020, relationships began to look and feel different when school transitioned to distance education.

Usually, when one decides to teach in a distance learning format, much thought and preparation has gone into the decision – best teaching practices and methods of assessment have been examined, the specific online platform used to teach virtually has been researched, training in tools for engagement in online work have been completed, and the element of choice is present. Moore-Adams et al. (2016) stated, "Teachers must have specific knowledge of pedagogy, content, and technology, as well as an understanding of how these elements interact to teach in virtual environments" (p. 334). To their point, those who want to teach online have the choice to do so and are supported in these areas. None of these things happened when the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a turn to distance learning. Instead, schools looked to the technologies they already knew or had in place and educators were given anywhere from just days to several weeks to prepare for an unknown world.

Teaching in an online environment is much different than traditional face-to-face teaching. One cannot take proven face-to-face teaching methods and simply move them to an online environment. A think-pair-share to check student understanding of a learning concept

might take less than five minutes in a traditional classroom setting but emulating that same teaching strategy could easily take at least ten minutes to get set up in the virtual world. Vasquez III and Serianni (2012) highlighted the need to "…examine the quality of student learning experiences in virtual schools, especially those of lower performing students" (p. 40). Whether instruction is face to face or through distance learning, the need for authentic learning experience that will challenge and engage students is imperative. Creating PDFs out of workbook pages and uploading them to a teaching platform is not necessarily an authentic or quality learning experience for students. Creating a more well-rounded lesson with a combination of guided and independent practice takes time – time that was not available to special education teachers as they prepared for distance learning.

Even before COVID-19, many schools provided 1:1 personal computing devices for their students, communication via email was the norm, and more and more software programs were being used to enhance educator efficiency. Flipped classrooms were in play and educators found it beneficial to record lectures for students to watch prior to coming to class; students and teachers then worked through the major learning concept in the face-to-face class where the teacher could troubleshoot confusion or misunderstanding (Unruh et al., 2016). However, even as more and more educators felt comfortable with technology and implemented it in their classrooms on a regular basis, Kormos (2018) described a gap in how prepared teachers were in using educational technology, highlighting that even though technological tools were available, not all educators were versed in them, nor utilized them effectively.

As special education teachers prepared to transition to distance learning in the wake of COVID-19, there were many unknown factors – how to provide quality instruction and access

to technology for all students with disabilities, how long it would be before schools could reopen (in the physical sense), how to ensure the mandates of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) would be met, and how to best support the unique needs of students with disabilities and their families. This paper explores the journey of, and seeks to understand, five special education teachers' experiences with distance learning during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March 2020 to May 2020.

Theoretical Framework

In 1973, Steele highlighted six critical functions of the classroom learning environment: security and shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure and growth. According to Steele, these basic functions must be fulfilled for effective teaching and learning. Although educators reflect on these functions and organize the learning environment with students in mind, the same functions support the educators themselves. The six functions are highlighted and defined in Table 1.

Table 1

Steele's Six Functions of the Environment (Steele, 1973)

Function	Definition
Security and Shelter	Within a learning environment, students and educators feel safe in both the physical and psychological sense.
Social Contact	Opportunities for interaction with peers and educators are available and authentic in nature.
Symbolic Identification	The learning environment highlights the goals, values and personal preferences of the people who "own" it.

Function	Definition
Task Instrumentality	The environment is designed to enhance and support the tasks and learning that occur within it.
Pleasure	Students and educators genuinely enjoy being a part of the learning environment.
Growth	The learning environment promotes the educator and students' development toward their potential abilities and personal qualities.

Professors in teacher preparation programs continue to use these functions as a lens through which to view the connections between teaching and learning and the classroom. According to LaLonde (2020), "Each function plays a role in the ultimate goal of engaging students in transformative experiences" (p. 78). The value of such transformative experiences equates to important and lasting growth.

But what do these functions look like in a virtual world of teaching and learning? How well-equipped were teachers to provide security and shelter in an online setting where some students were unable to log in due to limited resources in the form of hardware or sporadic internet connectivity? Barbour (2007) noted that social interactions are vital components in the establishment of virtual schools. How was social contact provided in a meaningful manner? However, as students were in their homes, learning virtually, the interactions and connections certainly looked different from their former physical classroom setting. How did Steele's six functions support distance learning for special education teachers, students and families? This study, by examining the journals of special education

teachers who were practicing during the pandemic, aimed to understand the teaching and learning experiences when instruction moved to distance learning.

Method

In phenomenological research, researchers seek to discover the essence of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007), therefore, this method was best suited to develop a deeper understanding of the special education teachers' experiences with distance learning during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this study consisted of five special education teachers, all of whom were engaged in teaching during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. These educators were each pursuing their master's degree in special education and were enrolled in their final capstone course when the pandemic began. In addition, all participants were employed in various school districts teaching special education to students ranging from birth to grade 12. Prior to beginning the study, approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was sought and granted. Detailed identifying information was intentionally omitted to protect subjects' right of confidentiality. At the conclusion of their graduate program, the journals of these five special education teachers were voluntarily collected and analyzed for this study.

For this phenomenological study the Moustakas (1994) method of analysis was used. The method consisted of six steps: (1) begin with full description of the participants' personal experiences with teaching special education during a pandemic; (2) develop a list of significant statements; (3) cluster the significant statements into "meaning units" or themes; (4) write a textural description; (5) write a structural description; and (6) write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions that represent the *essence* of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The researchers began the analysis by individually becoming familiar with the data –
immersing ourselves by reading and rereading each participant's journal. Significant
statements, sentences, and quotes were highlighted in each journal entry and meaningful units
were established. The researchers then came together to share analysis units and discover
commonalities. These units were then clustered to form the invariant constituents. Moustakas
(1994) describes invariant constituents as the unique qualities of the experience that stand out
and in which the core themes from the participants' experiences emerge. Expressions were
eliminated if they were overlapping, repetitive, and vague. What remained became the
invariant constituents of the participants' experiences. Clustering the invariant constituents
into core themes followed. For this study, if at least four of the five participants shared
experiences related to the identified core theme we considered them to be salient themes. We
continued reduction and eliminations of invariant constituents to allow for the emergence of
core themes common to all participants.

Textural descriptions and structural descriptions were written in the next step of data
analysis. The textural description of the experiences of the participants was carefully
investigated. Significant statements and themes were written as textural descriptions of *what*
the participants experienced teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This step was
followed by writing a structural description of *how* the phenomenon (i.e., teaching in a
pandemic) was experienced in terms of conditions, situations and context. Both textural and
structural descriptions reflect the original experiences of the participants, including verbatim
examples. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both textural and
structural descriptions was written. From this, the *essence* of the phenomenon (Creswell,

2013) was presented to represent the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of teachers teaching remotely in a pandemic.

Results

This section highlights the lived experiences, in the form of journals, of five special education teachers teaching during a pandemic. The collective core of the participants' experiences concerning teaching in a pandemic was examined to uncover the textural and structural elements needed in order to understand the difficulties of and improve the distance learning effectiveness. Textural and structural themes from the analysis of the participants' journals emerged; they included (a) emotions, (b) connections and relationships, and (c) less is more. Structural themes included (a) needed supports, (b) routines, and (c) special education constraints. Figure 1 presents a data map illustrating the development of the textural and structural themes.

Figure 1

Map of (A) Themes to (B) Invariant Constituents to (C) Meaningful Units
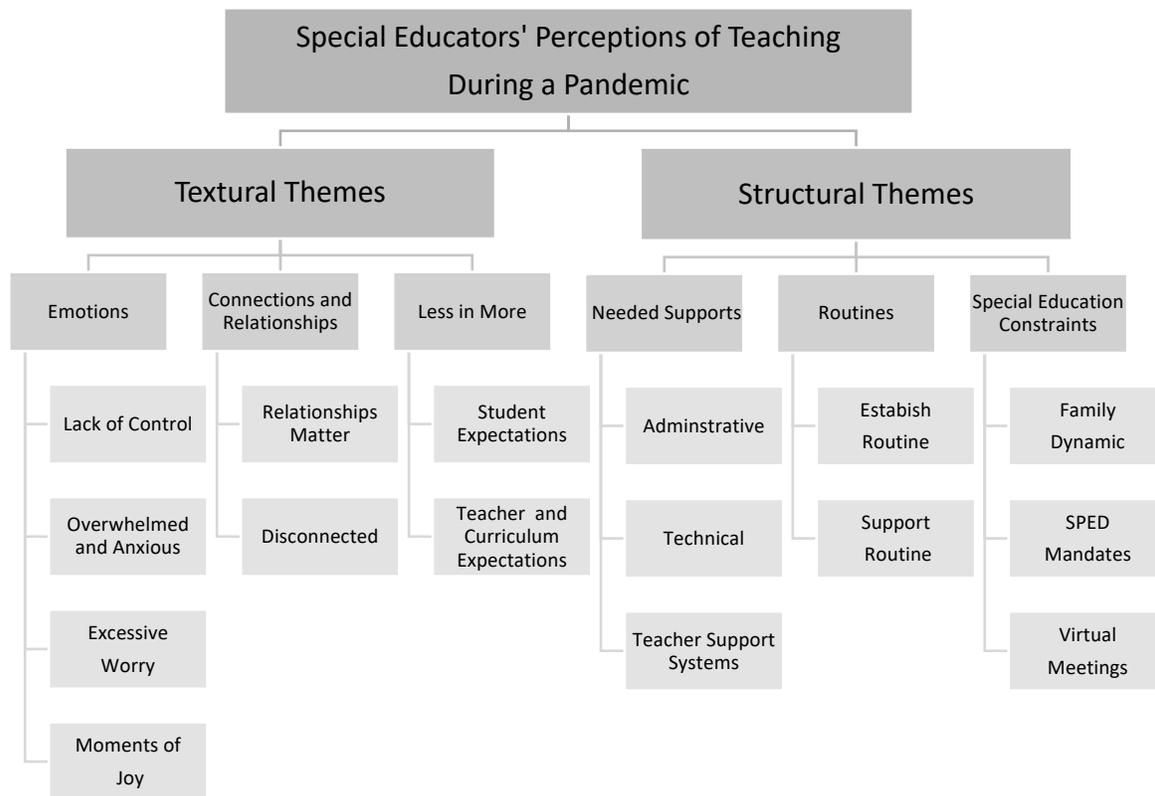
The following sections are organized into the six themes that emerged (i.e., three textural and three structural) including journal quotations as evidence. Quotations included were not meant to serve as an exhaustive list but rather representations of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences of teaching in a pandemic.

Composite Textural Descriptions

Three textural themes emerged that represented what the special education teachers experienced while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) emotions, (b) connections and relationships, and (c) less is more. The themes, invariant constituents, examples of

meaningful units, and examples of sample quotes are shown in Table 2. A discussion in

relation to the literature and teacher experiences follows each textural theme.

Table 2

Textural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
Emotions	Lack of Control	Feeling out of control, switching trust to parents	"When kids are in school, I have much more control and parents put a lot of trust in teachers."
	Overwhelmed and anxious	Exhausted, confused, stressed	"I was nervous to hear about the plans to change each of my IEPs to distance learning IEPs,"
	Excessive Worry	Worry about students, are students safe? How are families surviving?	"Worried about families, they (parents) are so stressed about the situation, my heart breaks for them."
	Moments of Happiness and Joy	See students' faces, meet parents, students are successful	"Truly a highlight of the week, feel more connected to parents as we work together to support their student learning."
Connections and Relationships	Relationships Matter	Checking in, frequent communication, parents thankful, increased collaboration, relationships matter most of all.	I feel more connected with them (families) as we work together to support their student's learning. I feel like a have a great relationship with all of them, thankfully. Because of COVID-19 I have a more open relationship with parents"

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
	Disconnected	Students showing up less and less	"Distance learning has made me feel alone without the connections of my SPED team." "I would love to see even one face! It's only week two and I am feeling very disconnected." "Students in attendance, but not "attending." "Zero kids in attendance." "Contact becomes less frequent and less personal."
Less is More	Student Expectation	Lower expectations and assignments, no testing, don't overload	"Ditch the worksheets and give students more hand-on meaningful projects."
	Teacher and Curriculum Expectations	Scale back teaching, not teaching new material	"Solutions to this problem may be to scale back on teaching. Strip it down to bare bones and focus on the most important things."

Textural Theme One: Emotions

Steele's six functions of an effective learning environment are an integral part of achieving the goal of constructing a positive learning environment most likely to support student growth (Steele,1973). Security and Shelter, one of the six functions, describes the sense of security and safety students and teachers feel in a functioning learning environment (Steele, 1973). Pleasure, another facet of an effective learning environment, allows students and teachers to enjoy wellbeing, comfort, and happiness and subsequently encourages them to take risks that foster growth. Lastly, the function of symbolic identification, allows the

students and teachers to see themselves in the classroom and the classroom experiences. Steel argued the six functions need to be present in the learning environment for students to learn (Steele, 1973). Therefore, it comes as no surprise when special education teachers were asked to describe their experiences teaching during the pandemic, they expressed emotions in which they no longer felt the comfort of security and shelter, the sense of pleasure, and finally a loss of their symbolic representation as a teacher. The new emotions described were disjointed and unlike the emotions they experienced prior to the pandemic. Specific emotions cited included: feeling a lack of control, feeling of being overwhelmed and anxious, excessive worry and, finally, moments of joy.

Lack of Control. With the change to distance learning and the unpredictable experiences that came with it, Steele's function of Security and Shelter was compromised. The participants shared very specific new emotions; including wonder at the surreal experience of what was happening in the world and feeling they had no control. This was evidenced by descriptors such as: out of control, confused, fearful, unsettling, and surreal. One special education teacher, understanding the importance of explicit instruction and using data to inform instruction, described how unsettling it was to feel unsure of student learning. Teacher 1 (T1) stated:

> I feel very disconnected and out of control of my students' learning. I cannot
> guarantee that my students are doing the activities that I have provided for them.... It's
> a little unsettling for me right now. I am a teacher that prides herself with updated
> weekly data, so I know exactly where my students are at with their [special education]
> goals and objectives...I am continuing to feel out of control of things right now. I

would rather be in the classroom teaching and dealing with the behaviors that happen throughout the day. (T1, March 30, 2020).

At times, especially in the beginning of distance learning, teachers were uncertain of their specific roles and how special education services would be provided; this uncertainty also led to feelings of a lack of control. Teacher 3 (T3) shared, "At this point, there is only so much I can provide as a [special education] teacher during distance learning" (T3, March 31, 2020). Teacher 4 (T4) asked, "How will I connect virtually with very young students as well as students with significant delays...how will related services be provided?" (T4, March 30, 2020).

Overwhelmed and Anxious. Throughout the time between March and May all participants, at one time or another, and to differing degrees, shared feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious and nervous. This, again, illustrates the importance of Steele's function of Security and Shelter (1973) – or in this case, lack of it. T1 stated, "I was nervous to hear about the plans to change each of my IEPs to distance learning IEPs" (T1, March 30, 2020).

Related to the actual provision of services or teaching, T2 was fearful – her thoughts were, "I am fearful of busywork and pushing students farther away from the love of learning" (T2, April 13, 2020). T4 discussed the challenge of meeting with the parents of a child who had just been referred for special education services. She stated, "I have two new referrals this week. I am disappointed that these will have to be done virtually" (T4, May 4, 2020).

Excessive Worry. Although the special educators may have been overwhelmed or anxious about their own work, worry about others also resonated in their journals. Specific

worries involved students, the families of their students, and their effectiveness as online teachers.

At the start of the pandemic, and throughout, teachers worried about the mental health of their students and families – as well as not being able to connect with some families. T4 stated,

> Parents are STRESSED. Parents are worried. Parents have much larger fears than the closing of schools. Parents are worried about keeping their families healthy. Parents are worried about their jobs and how they will continue to support their families if they have a loss of income...very few parents mentioned concerns with their children's learning. They have greater fears than education right now. (T4, March 30, 2020)

As time went on, educators continued to describe worries about their students and families. In April, the following comments were written:

"I continue to worry about the stress levels of families during these challenging times" (T4, April 14, 2020).

"As I chat with parents, that is exactly how they are feeling – overwhelmed and stressed" (T1, April 6, 2020).

"Parents are so overwhelmed having to work from home and having children with disabilities on top of that" (T3, April 27, 2020).

"The other family concerns me. Neither I, or the classroom teacher, has been able to make contact with the family or student since the pandemic began" (T2, April 2, 2020).

"I could not get my mind off how this is going for my students. I am worried, sad, anxious for them" (T5, April 4, 2020).

Undergirding concern for families was that of safety for students, as voiced by T4,

I am most worried to hear that child protection referrals are down. With children spending more time at home and having less interactions with mandated reporters outside their home, I am afraid that more children are at risk than ever before. At risk children are even more vulnerable during a time like this. (T4, May 4, 2020)

According to Steele (1973), the learning environment highlights the goals, values and personal preferences of the people within it. During distance learning, the special education teachers worried they were losing sight of their goals, values, and teaching identity. This was evident in their reflections of uncertainty and what could have been done differently. T2 stated, "My students are struggling, and I am struggling" (T2, April 15, 2020). While thinking about how to help students with the transition to distance learning, T5 stated, "This really sat heavy on my heart this weekend. I realized my students probably didn't even know where to begin, and we as teachers haven't done a lot to help them navigate this because we have been too involved in our own stress" (T5, April 6, 2020). T1 stated, "Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I sometimes feel like I know exactly what I should be doing and, at times, I start to feel like I am not providing my students with enough" (T1, April 14, 2020).

Moments of Joy. This was not a dominant theme, but when teachers were able to see and talk with their students, feelings of joy and gratitude were apparent in their writing. T1 wrote, "One parent said that their daughter stopped in her tracks when she heard my voice. That made me feel good. I miss them as much as they miss me" (T1, April 1, 2020).

Joy also came in the form of communication from students and families and taking

risks in their teaching. After uploading videos for her students to watch, one teacher stated,

It was incredibly exciting to get responses back from families. Approximately half of

the families sent pictures or a video of the students doing the activity. It was fun to see

their smiles again...Before all this started, I would have never been comfortable

sending videos to the families I work with. Now, I am making and sending videos

regularly without even thinking about it. (T4, April 1, 2020)

Even as teachers worried about their students, they were happy to see their students,

especially when the contact was initiated by the student. T3 shared how a former student

requested that he be at an online meeting and stated, "He [student] was very happy to see me"

(T3, May 6, 2020).

Textural Theme Two: Connections and Relationships

Teaching and learning is interactive and people-centered. Steele (1973) stated that a

learning environment needs to be arranged to promote positive social contact and student-

teacher interaction. As teachers, students, and families reacted and acclimated to the distance

learning environment the essential function of social contact became fragmented, at times

even nonexistent. In their journals, the special education teachers described their feelings that

social contact, referred to in this study as connections and relationships, became more

important than ever during distance learning. Within the special education teachers' journals,

it was revealed that relationships matter; participants shared connecting to students and

families became their primary focus, that building and sustaining relationships was gratifying,

and highlighted the disconnect and challenges they experienced while seeking social interaction during the pandemic.

Relationships Matter. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) believes children can be the bridge between home and school relationships. She stated, "Most [educators] felt the key to their success in working with parents was the ability to put the child – their strengths and their vulnerabilities, their achievements and their challenges – at the center of the parent-teacher conversation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004, para. 5). As participants in this study journaled about their students and wondered how they were doing during the early days of the pandemic, it was clear they desired contact with students and their families, hoping to build bridges and provide support. T4 stated, "Relationships matter and I feel, like a lot of teachers do that I have connected with online, that relationships need to be our top priority right now" (T4, April 9, 2020). To that end, one of the teachers made it her goal, on the first day of distance learning, to contact each family and connect with them. She stated, "I started calling each of my parents. I was able to talk to eight of the nine; just by talking to parents, it made me feel more connected to my students" (T1, March 30, 2020). Special education teachers found it important to listen to families when creating Individualized Distance Learning Plans (IDLPs) and planning for distance learning; T2 stated,

> I have decided not to write these plans [IDLPs] until week one is over. I need feedback
> from families on what will work and what will not work for them. The collaboration
> between schools and families must be strong. (T2, March 31, 2020)

Many special education teachers found distance learning increased collaboration between parents and schools, providing social contact and deepening the home/school relationship. T4 stated, "My teaching plan is mostly focused around supporting parents during

this time" (T4, April 1, 2020). One teacher highlighted that distance learning helped parents

"... have a much stronger idea of their child's strengths and weaknesses" and was hopeful this

would only strengthen the teacher/family relationship (T2, April 24, 2020).

According to Weinstein and Romano (2015) student/teacher relationships based on

warmth and empathy are significantly associated with student engagement in learning

activities, particularly so with students who are academically at-risk. The care the teachers in

our study showed toward students and families highlight the value they placed on

relationships. Teachers enjoyed hearing from their students and being able to connect with

them, at times setting up Zoom meetings or Google Hangouts so students could just stop by

and check in. One teacher pointed out that unstructured Zoom sessions or 1:1 meetings helped

build connections with students and supported them in their individual learning needs (T5,

April 6, 2020).

Social contact and interactions are influenced by arrangement within the classroom,

yet once distance learning began educators needed to create new ways of interacting with

students and parents. Phone calls weren't always the easiest way to communicate as, at times,

families ran out of minutes on their phones (T2, April 24, 2020). Due to this, educators found

themselves using a variety of technology tools including texting, Facebook messenger,

Remind App, Dropbox, and learning management systems such as Blackboard Collaboration,

G Suite for Education (Google Hangout, Google Classroom, Google Voice and Google

Forms), SeeSaw, Schoology, and Zoom. Tools that typically aren't used to communicate with

families became a "normal" part of practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. T2 stated,

"Today I tried reaching my remaining family via Facebook messenger. I contacted a teacher

of my student's older sister, who mentioned that FB messenger will sometimes work. Worth a

shot!" (April 3, 2020). One teacher utilized three different communication methods in order to reach parents. She stated, "Today I checked in on each family that I work with, either with Zoom, text, or Seesaw (whichever they indicated as their preference). It was so nice to connect again" (T4, April 3, 2020).

Although the special education teachers felt it was important to maintain contact and communication with parents and students, there were sometimes gaps in communication, especially as time went on. T3 wrote, "I have not been having success connecting with my students at all" (May 4, 2020). Teachers found this challenging and collaborated with others to support them in trying to reach out to families, including school social workers, cultural liaisons, and home/school liaisons. T5, when writing about the support provided by other professionals stated,

> They were so helpful! They had connections to the students that helped us get in
> contact with them. Without these two, we would have not been able to get in contact
> with these 11 students due to lack of internet or disconnected phones. (T5, March 31,
> 2020)

When the teachers in the study were able to connect with families, they expressed appreciation for the work students were completing and the effort parents were putting in to support their children. T2 stated, "Parents were very helpful in sharing what was working and how their child responded to work" (T2, April 2, 2020). T2 also noted, "I have had a lot more communication in the last couple days – which is great. Building relationships day by day" (T2, April 6, 2020).

Overall, it appeared the special education teachers worked diligently to maintain communication and relationships with their students and families, providing support and reassurance. T5 recognized the struggle some parents were having. She stated, "This [distance learning] has been a huge burden on families and can only imagine the stress it has put on them" (T5, May 8, 2020). T1 noted, "One positive thing about our new way of learning is the communication I am having with my students' parents. I feel so much more connected to them as we work together to support their student's learning" (April 15, 2020).

Disconnect. Just as maintaining, and even growing relationships, with students and their families was important, participants also wrote about the need for peer collaboration or support. When schools promote a culture of collaboration the workforce, in general, is satisfied, committed and professionally involved (Banerjee et al., 2017). When collaboration was absent, due to the pandemic and heightened expectations put on educators, a clear feeling of disconnect was apparent. One teacher wrote, "Distance learning has also made me feel alone, without the connection of my SPED team" (T1, April 14, 2020). Another lamented the loss of community, "I met with our special education team for child study via Google meet. It left me feeling disconnected" (T2, March 31, 2020). T3 felt a disconnect in teacher-to-teacher communication, as illustrated by the following written statement, "It is at this point that I truly believe that I have very little to offer to my students if I cannot have ongoing communication with their case managers" (T4, April 11, 2020). As the pandemic continued, less of the special education teachers' time was spent on collaborating with fellow teachers, while more was spent answering emails into evening hours and on weekends.

The disconnect teachers sometimes felt was not limited to colleagues. On May 4, 2020 T3 noted that his team was "truly struggling with how to connect with students."

Teachers often found students were in attendance during virtual meetings, but not *attending*. This looked different in each "classroom." T1 described one student "running from the iPad" (T1, April 1, 2020) while another fell asleep (T1, April 16, 2020). T5 noted that as time moved on, "It appears students are losing steam" (T5, May 6, 2020).

Textural Theme Three: Less is More

Growth was described by Steele (1973) as a function of the classroom environment that highlights how it plays a role in a student's intellectual development and academic achievement. A classroom environment that is stimulating and student-centered is correlated to increased student growth and engagement (Romano and Weinstein, 2019). Therefore, classroom teachers create opportunities for learners to actively engage and explore authentic lessons that promote creativity and critical thinking. As the special education teachers scrambled to adapt to distance learning, they prepared and sent home worksheets, packets, and other materials. Soon they came to think of these materials as busy work and it was apparent that Steele's function of growth was missing and lost in translation. As distance learning expanded into the end of the school year, the special education teachers articulated the importance of *less is more*. They reexamined their teaching practices to include changes in the expectations of students as well as changes in their own teaching and curriculum expectations in order to restore the potential of growth for their students and themselves.

Expectations of Students. A common theme throughout the special education teacher journals was one of empathy for students and families. Soon after distance learning began, teachers received messages of support from administrators, which also communicated the theme of "less is more." These messages were similar to ones sent by administrators in other states. Bresfold et al. (2020) stated, "Administrators continued to ask teachers to hold student

accountable for completing assignments, but also asked them to be empathetic and flexible with students" (p. 15). A special education teacher wrote,

> Our principal and special education directors have advised us to start small and pace ourselves. Parents at home are just as overwhelmed with things changing as much as we are. We need to make sure we are not assigning or communicating too much the first couple of weeks. (T1, April 6, 2020)

T4 quoted a message from her superintendent, "If we do continue the distance learning through the end of the year, please keep in mind less is better" (T4, April 14, 2020).

Teacher and Curriculum Expectations. In some districts around the United States, educators struggled to prepare for distance learning without being provided with extra time to do so. According to Bresfold et al. (2020),

> Their teachers were not provided with additional time or support from the district for the difficult work of designing online instruction to accommodate the academic and social needs of these students, while also being held responsible for modifying all of the assignments that the students received from their other classroom teachers, sometimes with only a few hours to do so. (pp. 16-17).

The teachers in this study were provided with at least a few days to prepare, but it is important to keep in mind that educators usually have weeks or months to prepare to teach online, not days. This minimal preparation time contributed to teachers feeling out of control with their classrooms; T1 stated, "Teaching digitally is not my cup of tea" (T1, April 1, 2020).

Special education teachers grappled with how to teach using the "less is more" mantra. Did that mean providing basic work, review only, or fewer assignments? How does one teach

IEP goals without access to specific learning materials or resources? T4 reflected, "Teaching social skills via distance learning has sure been a shift...This has certainly taken some out-of-the-box thinking" (April 2, 2020). Teachers found themselves providing materials for parents to use in their homes (T1, April 3, 2020; T3, April 10, 2020). T5 wondered how to best meet students' needs, "I do not want them [students] to fall behind. I am trying to prevent this by not teaching new material. Everything I plan to provide my students with for distance learning material is all review" (T5, April 9, 2020).

Authentic experiences provide opportunities for meaningful learning to occur. T4 suggested teachers, "Ditch the worksheets and give students more hands-on meaningful projects and things to explore" (T4, April 6, 2020). Yet, for a variety of reasons, many special education teachers struggled with being able to provide authentic learning experiences. T5 noted, "I am struggling to create engaging packets for my students. It is difficult to expect them to learn/practice math without the support [of face-to-face teaching]" (T5, April 1, 2020). Another teacher highlighted how the school district directed special education teachers to create choice boards centered around student goals and objectives and send a new choice board home every two weeks. Choice boards are often used to provide authentic experiences but the creation of new activities to work on with the same goals and objectives was time consuming. T1 stated, "As distance learning continues it may get more and more tricky to come up with quality activities and not just busy work while at home" (T1, April 6, 2020). On April 28th, T1 again highlighted the difficulty of designing quality activities that the students could do at home.

Teachers pride themselves on monitoring student progress but found this difficult to do during distance learning as they often prepared packets to send to students without having

a sense of students' understanding, due to the new packets being sent out at the same time old packets were collected. T5 noted, "I struggle to know when a student needs extra help or explanation with distance learning" (T5, April 22, 2020). T2 focused on lesson planning during distance learning, "Lesson planning takes on a whole other meaning when I do not get to see my students' work. I am not sure if I should keep on a topic, move on, review, try another way, etc. It doesn't feel like specialized instruction" (T2, April 8, 2020).

T2 felt overwhelmed as she reflected on her creation of short videos that went unwatched by students. She stated, "It definitely makes me feel like I am just assigning work and not really *teaching*. I am not sure how to fix that right now" (T2, April 13, 2020). This appeared to encapsulate how the teachers felt during distance learning – the disconnect between distance teaching and Steele's function of growth was readily seen.

Summary of Textual Themes:

Textual themes, arising from what the study participants experienced while teaching during a pandemic included experiencing a variety of emotions, a continued building of connections with their students and parents, a sense of loss of community, and a dissonance between what teachers know to be best practice and what was happening during distance learning. These themes directly tie in with Steele's (1973) functions of security and shelter, pleasure, symbolic identification, social contact and growth – however these functions looked much different during distance learning than they had during face-to-face instruction. They impacted the structural descriptions or the "how" of the experiences of special education teachers during a pandemic. The following section highlights these structural descriptions.

Composite Structural Descriptions

Three structural themes emerged that represented what the special education teachers experienced while teaching during a pandemic: (a) needed supports, (b) routines, and (c) special education constraints. The themes, invariant constituents, examples of meaningful units and examples of sample quotes are shown in Table 3. A discussion in relation to the literature and teacher experiences follows each structural theme.

Table 3

Structural Themes, Invariant Constituents, Meaningful Units, and Sample Quotes

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
Needed Supports	Administrative	Superintendents, principals, special education directors and teacher's union	"It was nice to hear this from our principal...she is demonstrating how to be a true leader by caring about staff and offering assistance anyway she can. This is very appreciated."
	Technical	Resources, create curriculum, collaborate, frustrating when not working	"They put together a website and starting compiling resources for teachers."
	Teacher Support Systems	Collaborating more	"We just never saw each other [prior to distance learning]. Now with the distance learning, we are calling each other and meeting twice a week. That has been a big positive with all the distance learning stuff going on."

Theme	Invariant Constituents	Meaningful Units	Sample Quotes
Routines	Establish a Routine	Tough day for students, adjusted instruction	"Distance learning is not the best for her [student] routine and leaning."
	Support the Routine	Students getting in the groove, sending home visual schedules.	"I tried to use familiar formats so students would be able to engage in the lesson, not trying to learn another new thing."
Special Education Constraints	Special Education Mandates	Needed to provide same service under law, unsure how, appreciated support from district	"Today I completed all of my Individualized Distance Learning Plans (IDLP) for my students and got them sent in the mail. What a feat that task was!"
	Virtual Meetings	Better than expected, able to be more flexible, easy to collaborate virtually	"Parents were happy with how the IEP meeting went. We were able to have conversations about this student is doing as if we were all sitting next to each other at a conference table."

Structural Theme One: Needed Supports

Task Instrumentality is defined by Steele (1973) as how a setting or environment enhances one's ability to perform a task within that environment. Steele broke down tasks into three categories: activities that take place *outside* of people, interactional activities that take place *between* people, and mental activities that occur w*ithin* people (p. 59). Additionally, Task Instrumentality may be further influenced by elements such as accessible materials, the quality of materials, and functioning technical features in the environment. As the special

education teachers journaled through frustrations and resolutions of distance learning, they identified specific supports they felt enhanced their ability to teach effectively. They appreciated administrative support, deemed access to technology a necessity for their students, and valued teacher support systems.

      Administrative. Brelsford and a team of researchers (2020) provided recommendations for improving administrators' preparedness in times of crisis, including developing authentic relationships with teachers, students and parents. All special education teachers in this study believed that in order to accomplish the task of effective teaching within the distance learning environment, they needed administrative support. From the beginning of the pandemic, special education teachers looked for support; T1 stated, "Hopefully our district will provide a sound example of what they want us to do to change each IEP" (T1, March 30, 2020). Support was provided by the state, as well as individual school districts. T4 noted, "I am thankful that the state made a simplified process for updating IEPs" (T4, March 31, 2020). Additionally, school districts worked to support special education teachers by providing clarity in completing special education paperwork, assigning teachers to help create IDLPs, and setting up websites with resources. The union, Education Minnesota, was also supportive; T4 noted, "It has been a very helpful resource through all the recent changes. They are constantly putting out new and updated information and resources for staff" (T4, April 8, 2020).

      At other times the provided support was designed to encourage teachers, "She [our principal] has randomly sent an email or called just to check in throughout the school closure" (T4, April 9, 2020). Administrators also encouraged teachers to make sure they were taking care of themselves during this time of distance learning (T1, April 6, 2020).

Although the teachers, at times, expressed frustration in their journals regarding the need for more clarity, more consistent guidelines, and clear expectations overall, they seemed to share more gratitude than blame. T4, when talking about the governor and plans for school closures, stated, "This proactive and forward thinking [schools providing lunches and childcare for medical workers] helped to alleviate many stresses on families" (T4, March 30, 2020).

Technical. Brelsford et al. (2020) also recommended that administrators anticipate and provide the resources and training (particularly technology) that teachers and students would likely need if schooling was disrupted (p. 20). Even though schools provided resources and supports, most of the special education teachers sought out additional resources on their own. Several teachers reported they joined virtual disability specific support groups through Blackboard Collaboration, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Teachers also reported they used technology to create materials for students, including visual schedules, choice boards, read alouds, and calendar songs. Additionally, teachers utilized free memberships to obtain helpful electronic and digital resources (e.g., Council for Council for Exceptional Children [CEC]).

The special education teachers voiced frustration when technology was more of a hinderance than a support. T4 explained, "Living in rural MN, our internet continues to be spotty. Every single day this week I have dealt with not being able to connect to the internet or the internet cutting out during a meeting" (T4, April 1, 2020). T2 added, "It crashed most of the day today, which is not a surprise. I did not hear from any of my students today" (T2, March 31, 2020). Teachers reported other issues such as technology not working the way it should, technology crashing for long periods of time (e.g., during IEP meetings), and most

importantly, students not having access to a computer and/or the internet. T5 noted that "20% of our students do not have access to the internet" (T5, March 30, 2020). T3 added, "This was a surreal moment for me because I realized that distance learning is not an equitable endeavor for some students" (T3, April 4, 2020). T4 summarized the technology concerns with the following statement, "I certainly hope we will not be failing students who haven't participated in distance learning by no fault of their own [limited or no access to technology]" (T4, April 7, 2020).

Teacher Support Systems. Many of the teachers reported that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, collaboration actually increased, partially due to being able to meet virtually. T1stated that due to the physical distance between classrooms "We just never saw each other [prior to distance learning]. Now with the distance learning, we are calling each other and meeting twice a week. That has been a big positive with all the distance learning stuff going on" (T1, April 8, 2020). Another teacher stated he was invited to a Google Hangouts meeting with a classroom, "...just to brainstorm instructional ideas" (T3, April 6, 2020).

The special education teachers stated they met more often with other teachers or work teams to share what was going well and what was not; T5 noted, "We were able to discuss our triumphs and struggles as well as share resources" (T5, April 9, 2020).

Structural Theme Two: Routines

Task Instrumentality describes how the design of an environment may foster or hinder the accomplishments of tasks performed within that environment. In order to rate the usefulness of Task Instrumentality, one must first specify the tasks to accomplish within that environment (Steele, 1973). Furthermore, Steele added Task Instrumentality may include

interference factors such as distractions, congestions, and sensory conditions or interactions that interrupt task accomplishment and lead to stress and chaos. These premises held true within the special education teachers' journals. As they began their journey of distance learning, they shared feelings of anxiousness, being overwhelmed, and genuinely feeling that something wasn't right. It was through this chaos they created new routines for both themselves and their students. By designing and establishing a routine in the environment more conducive to learning, they reported improvements in distance learning.

Establish Routines. As the special education teachers adjusted their teaching styles to that of distance learning, they found it became a trial-and-error process. At the start of distance learning, teachers shared student frustration. T1 described the frustration of several students as, "Distance learning is not the best for her [student] routine and learning" (T1, April 15, 2020) and "Tough day for one of my students. She had two major meltdowns...she had not displayed that type of behavior before and her mom was very concerned. I honestly think it is due to distance learning and her routine is not normal" (T1, April 22, 2020).

The journals soon reflected that the special education teachers recognized their students' craving for established routines. T5 stated, "I have talked to a few students and they are struggling to keep a routine" (T5, April 1, 2020). T2 added, "A mom shared that her daughter was so excited when she saw my worksheet, yes worksheet, because she knew exactly what to do" (T2, April 2, 2020). Therefore, T2 shared how she adjusted her instruction, "I tried to use familiar formats so students would be able to engage in the lesson, not trying to learn another new thing" (T2, April 2, 2020). T1 reiterated the importance of establishing a routine at home during distance learning, "I gathered visuals for a student that has been having a very hard time with her new routines at home" (T1, April 6, 2020).

Support Routines. According to Romano and Weinstein (2019), effective teachers have procedures and routines in their classrooms and spend a good amount of time teaching the procedures. As distance learning stretched from weeks to months, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the special education teachers' journals comprised parallel comments highlighting the importance of building and supporting home-based routines for their students with disabilities. It is, then, no wonder the special education teachers in the study began to feel more successful as more routines were established. T1 stated, "We are three weeks in and our new normal is starting to sync in" (T1, April 17, 2020). One routine for a teacher and student during a 30-minute Google Hangout session consisted of, "a groove of a chat, game, mini-lesson, she shows me her math work I assigned for the week and we do some kind of data probe" (T2, April 23, 2020). In their journals, the teachers commented on how students adjusted to routines as they became more comfortable.

T4 stated, "I also feel like families are getting into a good routine and are feeling more comfortable" (T4, April 17, 2020). Additionally, the teachers shared how they supported the home routines by creating and sending home materials (e.g., a visual schedule) or scheduling weekly online meetings with students.

Structural Theme Three: Special Education

The special education teachers provided information about how the constraints of special education offered the needed framework to accomplish their required tasks. They described several barriers to overcome in distance learning, including working within the confinements of the special education mandates and limitations of virtual meetings. It was through the examination of the barriers that the teachers were able to construct more useful elements within their environments to support the progression of educating individuals with

disabilities remotely. Once again, Task Instrumentality became a factor; the teachers needed to first specify the tasks they needed to accomplish during distance learning and then adjust the environment to best accomplish these tasks (Steele, 1973).

Special Education Mandates. In the event of extended school closures due to a pandemic, a school district remains responsible for the education of students eligible for special education services. At the start of the distance learning, the special education teachers were directed to create a plan detailing how they would continue to meet the requirements of IDEA (Minnesota Department of Education [MDE], 2020); this was done by writing an Individualized Distance Learning Plan (IDLP) for each student receiving special education services. The special education teachers found this process stressful. T3 stated, "They expect me to provide the same amount of service as I would have been providing if there wasn't a pandemic going on" (T3, May 1, 2020). T1 concurred, "There are so many new requirements and amendments that need to be made. I am feeling extremely overwhelmed and uncertain of how to proceed" (T1, April 2, 2020). Teacher 4 shared her joy upon completion, "Today I completed all of my Individualized Distance Learning Plans (IDLP) for my students and got them sent in the mail. What a feat that task was!" (T4, March 31, 2020).

Hylton (2020) said "schools and districts should make sure they are making "a good faith effort" to provide comparable services using alternate means and should be prepared to think creatively to do that" (p. 3). As mentioned earlier, services were provided to students using technology such as Zoom, SeeSaw, and G Suite tools. Additionally, some special education teachers sent home packets of materials, including choice cards.

Amid the collected journal entries, the special education teachers shared their concerns about monitoring the progress of their students with disabilities, as there were no

opportunities for face-to-face data collection. T1 noted, "One of my big concerns right now is taking data for progress notes...I am not sure how I am going to write up how they are progressing with their goals and objectives" (T1, April 9, 2020). Another teacher shared comments from a special education faculty meeting, with the takeaway being, "All of us special educators, are not able to accurately measure goals and objectives. So, we talked briefly about measuring basic instructional data through Google Forms" (T3, April 9, 2020).

Special education referrals were still being made, hence evaluations still needed to proceed. As these needed to be completed virtually, parents had even more responsibility. T4 noted the burden of these expectations, "It is going to put more work on the parent's plate, as I won't be there to do the testing myself. We will have to rely on parents to share even more information with us than ever before" (T4, May 4, 2020). All special education teachers in this study commented on how time consuming the paperwork was, often working all day, evenings, and weekends. However, throughout the journals, it was also evident how appreciative the teachers were to receive support with the special education mandates.

Virtual Meetings. Special education team members held numerous meetings to ensure the needs of students with disabilities were being met. Many of the meetings described in the special education teachers' journals consisted of annual IEP meetings for students; these meetings are required to be held at least once every twelve months. Therefore, even though COVID-19 caused school closures, IEP meetings still had to be held. Fortunately, these meetings can be conducted by alternate means such as video conference or telephone (Prior, 2020). Conducting IEP meetings virtually became the only option. This was a new experience for the special education teachers, although they reported that the steps of the virtual meetings went better than expected. T4 stated,

I held my first IEP virtually this week. The parent was having a hard time scheduling because she was working so much. She let me know on Monday afternoon that she had Tuesday morning available. I invited all the team members (and it is a rather large team) and every single person was able to come via Zoom. Prior to the pandemic, I wouldn't have been so quick to offer virtual meetings...Zoom wasn't a part of our everyday vocabulary and skill set. (T4, April 20, 2020)

All special education teachers reported that the virtual meetings went far better than expected. They were proud of themselves. T2 stated, "Everybody was able to join on time, I figured out how to present, and setting goals went smoothly. I actually think it was much easier to stick to a reasonable timeline as well" (T2, April 16, 2020). They felt through the framework of a virtual meeting, they believed the IEP team stuck to the time frame and agenda of the meeting and it was inferred that all members of the team felt comfortable participating. T1 stated, "Parents were happy with how the IEP meeting went. We were able to have conversations about how this student is doing as if we were all sitting next to each other at a conference table" (T1, April 7, 2020).

Summary of Structural Themes

Structural themes provided a description of "how" the phenomenon (i.e., teaching in a pandemic) was experienced in terms of conditions, situations and context. These themes directly tie in with Steele's function of Task Instrumentality, which is defined as how a setting or environment enhances one's ability to perform a task within that environment (Steele, 1973).

As the special education teachers entered the new realm of distance learning caused by COVID-19, it was a territory in which none had experience. There were no directions, no models, no plans in place. Teaching effectively during distance learning proved to be an organic process for the special education teachers. They discovered that they needed the framework of Task Instrumentality, combined with the constraints of special education to guide them. They needed support within their environment (i.e., administration, technology, and teacher support systems) to complete the tasks.

The Essence of the Phenomenon

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of special education teachers who were teaching during a pandemic in order to identify factors that contribute to effective distance learning. By examining the textural and structural themes, it was noted that, as weeks went on, the special education teachers reexamined their roles in delivering effective distance learning instruction. The special education teachers in the study experienced a mixture of emotions that guided and built resiliency. They believed that connections and relationships mattered. Finally, they believed they needed to focus on the most essential elements of lessons. To improve their effectiveness, the special education teachers needed the supports of the administration, the stability of routines, and the constraints of special education mandates. The overall essence was that the special education teachers sought connections and relationships so they could adapt their teaching to meet the needs of their students – ultimately demonstrating resiliency.

Conclusion

The special education teachers' journals began with sentences similar to, "T*oday was the beginning of a journey"* and *"Today was our first day of distance learning*." Little did the teachers realize that by the end of their journey (March 2020 – May 2020) they would have expanded their understanding of what is needed to be an effective distance learning teacher and gained skills in resiliency.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the special education teachers in this study powered through an array of emotions as schools transitioned to distance learning. As these emotions were experienced, it validated what effective teachers had known all along – that one cannot teach without connections and relationships. This was evident through their written words as they shared feelings of disconnect with students, parents and peers in the early days – followed by moments of joy as they developed routines and procedures that facilitated communication and connections.

Additionally, the special education teachers soon became more comfortable with distance learning and focused on the essential pieces, or goals, of learning experiences, even as these needed to be scaled down to accommodate learners and their families who were experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

It appeared, early on, that the special education teachers worried about their teaching effectiveness. Although they may have felt accomplished with their teaching roles and use of Steele's six functions (1973) of a learning environment within a face-to-face classroom setting prior to the pandemic, distance learning brought new learning and struggles. Some of these struggles were due to the restructuring of functions such as security and shelter and task

instrumentality. Other struggles related to special education mandates that still needed to be followed, but the implementation of them was much harder to envision due to distance learning (monitoring progress of students, new referrals).

As distance learning continued, the special education teachers sought the supports they needed to once again view themselves as effective teachers within a distance learning environment. They found such supports from administration, technology and its resources, and peers - each entity offering its own kind of support. It was through this process they discovered what they knew all along – that good pedagogy, the art of teaching, changes with the students and life experiences.

When the 2019-2020 academic year wound down many of the special education teachers looked to the positive effects that the COVID-19 pandemic may have brought forward – the need to take care of others. They looked to the future, sharing their thoughts about being open-minded in their teaching and moving beyond methods that were comfortable but not, perhaps, what worked best for students and families. Value was found in the technology and plans were made for implementing some of these tools into their teaching even after the conclusion of the pandemic. Most importantly, the special education teachers felt it was important to continue listening, continue adapting, and continue connecting with students and families.

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