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COVID-19 Health Pandemic: Impact on the Work of Special Educators

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Laura Medwetz

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2021

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UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

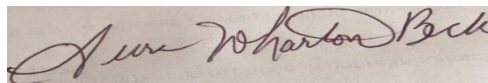
COVID-19 Health Pandemic: Impact on the Work of Special Educators

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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8/24/2021

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ABSTRACT

School closures in March 2020 due to COVID-19 affected over one billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Stay-home orders issued across multiple regions required schools to shift to a distance learning model for the remainder of the school year. As the health pandemic advanced into the following school year, special educators continued to navigate multiple changes in programming and their professional duties. This mixed methods study aimed to examine how special education teachers in one mid-western state described the impact of the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on their work and the provision of special education services to their students.

This longitudinal study began at the onset of the health pandemic (spring 2020) by analyzing statewide survey results and follow up interviews. The survey revealed multiple practices for specialized programming, including new uses of technology and teachers' positive coping approaches to deal with the rapid shift to distance learning. Interviews expose a deeper understanding of the multiple changes in the work of special educators, including online technologies, various methods for interaction, a dependency on others to provide specialized services using a distance learning model, and difficulties with work-life balance.

The study continued into the 2020 – 2021 school year by examining the experiences of four special educators during the ongoing health pandemic. Participants reported significant incidents using a structured monthly logging tool. They also engaged in three open-ended interviews throughout the school year (fall, winter, and spring) to narrate their experiences, frustrations, and insights. Findings feature four case studies and expose themes of the extraordinary workload and the value of collegial support during pandemic programming.

A comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon reveals indicators of cumulative organizational trauma due to the COVID-19 restrictions and required changes in special education programming. This in-depth study exposes the susceptible position of special educators as they faced the work necessary during pandemic programming and the negative patterns resulting within the work culture. Recommendations include an organizational stance for reimagining and restructuring systems to enhance special education teacher retention and student learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: health pandemic, special education programming, online learning, special education paperwork, special education workload, collegial support, organizational trauma

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Minnesota classroom instruction was abruptly interrupted in 2020 by governor orders (Governor Walz Executive Order 20-02) for a school closure period from March 18th to March 27th, due to health concerns of the Coronavirus Disease -19. During the brief closure period, districts and schools quickly shifted typical face to face instruction to distance learning. Without substantial training or prior experience, teachers used fully online technologies as the primary method of teaching (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020).

The tremendous challenges in developing distance learning programming for students receiving special education services during the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic came to my attention as a seminar course instructor and university supervisor of student teachers completing their final clinical practice during spring 2020. I conducted a pilot study to explore the health pandemic experience for special education teachers (SpEdTs) by disseminating a survey at the onset of the pandemic (spring 2020) and interviews with SpEdTs after the school end (June through July). Reflecting on the spring semester, pilot study participants conveyed the urgent need to learn new instructional technologies while reorganizing the instructional day to accommodate the specialized services outlined on the required student plans. One SpEdT reported initially using a newly acquired online program the first week of distance learning, then quickly discovering the platform inaccessible for her students with more significant cognitive disabilities. This SpEdT then self-taught herself to use a new online application and spent an extreme amount of time revising numerous online lessons within the second week of distance learning. Another SpEdT logged 120 different interactions with school team members and parents within the first week of distance learning to develop a useful instructional schedule. These stories verify the sentiment of the Minnesota Commissioner of Education claim,

“educators across Minnesota are going above and beyond to reach and teach their students” (MDEc, 2020, p. 2).

Providing special education services and programming from a teacher’s home on such a large scale was unprecedented. Rapid changes in a SpEdT’s ability to deliver specialized services in a stay home environment was compounded by health concerns while attending to personal and family responsibilities. Schools ended the 2019-2020 school year uncertain of how they would proceed to the next school year (MDEa, 2020). This study attempts to make meaning of the work of SpEdTs during extraordinary conditions of a health pandemic and the unanticipated invitation to restructure special education programming.

Statement of the Problem

Due to the health concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota public schools provided educational programming through distance learning mid-March through the end of the 2020 school year (MDE, 2020a). The *Minnesota Distance Teaching and Learning Implementation Guidance* (MDE, 2020c) document define distance learning as student access to “appropriate educational materials and daily interaction with their licensed teacher(s)” (p. 5). For students requiring intensive intervention and support, the state issued a guiding document for distance learning and the implementation of a multi-tiered system of support (MDE, 2020c). The framework required daily contact and academic engagement between teachers, students and parents (MDE, 2020c). Although daily student engagement is typical, including the parent in daily instruction was unique to distance learning.

A special educator’s primary role is to design and implement intensive intervention and support services to students identified with special education needs. In my COVID-19 pilot study, SpEdTs reported the inability to provide all identified instruction and services determined

on specialized student plans. Many students experienced a lapse in services and educational programming during the COVID-19 stay home orders, while some students accessed little or no instruction. This gap of services is worth continued study as educators pursue their work in schools in the upcoming school year. Perhaps a study examining the experiences of SpEdTs as they continue their work amidst a pandemic can provide greater insight into the skills needed to teach when confronted with significant obstacles.

According to Hartshore and colleagues (2020), multiple variables contributed to the problem of providing distance learning to students during COVID-19 stay home orders. These problems may have been even more significant for students who are already at risk academically and require intensive intervention. To further define the challenge of providing specialized services to students through distance learning, I have organized relevant variables into four compelling factors.

Factor One: Providing Fully Online Instruction

Due to the governor-issued orders to implement distance learning (Exec. Order 20-19, 2020), the primary form of instruction evolved into online learning. Teaching online requires specialized skills in preparing instructional content, managing the online learning environment, and using various online tools or technologies (Oliver et al., 2009). Teachers require training in using technology in the classroom and they also need time to apply new skills to their instructional practice (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020). Regardless of the current experience or skills in using instructional technology, teachers needed to shift instructional delivery from the classroom to a fully online platform and make the changes quickly.

Parents reported differences in online instruction by their schools during distance learning, and results vary given parent income level. Approximately half of the higher income

parents reported schools offering a lot of online instruction compared to 38% of the parents of lower income (Horowitz, 2020). Furthermore, in this same study, 29% of the lower income parents reported not much or no instruction. The Minnesota Department of Education (2020c) allocated instructional materials as a method of distance learning to supplement or replace e-learning or online learning (p. 5). Some students received hard copy instructional packets delivered to the home or available for parent pick up at the school. Since not all families use technology, communication barriers develop between school and families (Buchter & Ringleman, 2018). This digital divide indicates learning inequities across schools and students through distance learning.

Factor Two: Depending on Parents for Instructional Engagement

Another factor impacting the provision of special education services in spring 2020 was the dependency on parents or guardians to ensure student engagement in instruction (MDE, 2020b). Given due process regulations and the rights outlined for students with disabilities and their families (IDEA, 2004), SpEdTs restructured special education service schedules and developed alternative instructional approaches in collaboration with parents to accommodate specialized programs. Team discussion of student programming shifted from describing the special education services offered in the school, to service options from a distance. Depending on the child's age and the severity of the disability, SpEdTs rely on parents to support their students with engaging, modifying assignments and navigating the variety on digital tools used in fully online learning environments (Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). The conditions for distance learning presented significant challenges to parents to provide educational programming within the home (MDE, 2020c, p. 2). Parents assumed more responsibility and an obligation to attend to their students learning each day due to a distance learning mandate.

Factor Three: Managing and Coping with the Work

During COVID-19 stay home orders, SpEdTs were required to restructure instruction and accommodate students and families to continue special education services (MDE, 2020c). Given the context of a worldwide health pandemic, professional, personal and family lives merged while teachers rapidly redefined professional responsibilities from home. Although the primary role of a SPEDT is to teach, the work is different from that of their general education colleagues (Bettini et al., 2018). More than half of the required work for SpEdTs is managing paperwork and communicating with colleagues, parents, and other student team members (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). Distance learning required new approaches in interacting with others by using many forms of technology (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020; Trust et al., 2020). The change in communication methods compounded with the amount of required interaction added layers to the possible stress SpEdTs experienced teaching from their home.

SpEdTs leave the profession due to stress, lack of administrative support, high workloads, dissatisfaction, lack of understanding of the role, and variability of support in mentoring and induction (Billingsley et al., 2004; Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Whitaker, 2000). During the COVID-19 school closures, the workload for teachers increased (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). The unprecedented demands of teaching during COVID-19 may have placed SpEdTs at an increased risk of experiencing high stress levels.

Factor Four: Needing a Professional Learning Community When Separated from Others

Given the mandate to shift to fully online learning, teachers needed to quickly develop new skills (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). New instructional technologies were required and, in many cases, never piloted with the age group or disability area before. According to Moolenaar (2012), teachers learn from one another and find inspiration from one another when

engaged in a social network with colleagues. Due to the mandates of social distancing at the onset of the health pandemic, teachers were isolated from their professional community and relied on interacting with others using virtual platforms (Trust et al., 2020). Some educators sought support beyond the primary school or district by engaging in online social media platforms or organizations (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020; Trust et al., 2020).

Systematic attention to educating all students through distance learning is a pressing problem of practice as educators continue to teach in a health pandemic era. Parent polls conducted during spring school closures report mixed perceptions of online learning across race and income levels and convey less satisfaction in student access and learning for non-White students and lower-income families (Superville, 2020; The Education Trust-New York, 2020). The Education Trust-New York and partnering organizations (2020) outlined recommendations to ensure educational equity for students with disabilities during the spring school closures. The recommendations included attention to student Individual Education Program (IEP), equitable access to learning materials, teacher and school counselor collaboration, family and community partnerships, and initial planning for fall school reopening starting as early as the current spring semester. As teachers worked to meet the unexpected challenges in providing distance learning, students and families also faced difficulty in the departure from a regular school day. A school's ability to ensure equitable student learning may depend on a partnership with neighborhoods and broader learning communities to develop a collective capacity to meet the prevalent challenges for students and families.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

School closures in March 2020 due to the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) affected over one billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). The pandemic's impact reached

Minnesota mid-March when classroom instruction was abruptly interrupted with a mandate to implement distance learning (Governor Walz Executive Order 20-41). The National Center for Education Statistics reported in the 2018-2019 school year that 14% of US public-school students received special education services. School closures in Minnesota (MN) from mid-March through the end of the school year impacted the work of SpEdTs striving to meet the needs of many students receiving special education services. A mixed-methods research study could provide insight into the work experiences of SpEdT as they navigated health pandemic conditions. This study aims to examine the multiple factors impacting special educators' work as they confront unusual circumstances in delivering specialized services to their students. This study's findings can shed light on teacher preparation, local district programming, and more significant systemic issues in special education programming. By exploring the pandemic phenomenon, I hope to influence the retention of educators in this high-needs teaching area of special education.

The purpose of this study is fourfold: (1) To identify effective methods in using a variety of equitable instructional technologies across multiple learning environments; (2) To identify effective methods for interacting and collaborating with families and integrate these practices into the professional work of teachers; (3) To identify approaches in managing and coping with the complex work of an educator; and (4) To identify the resources to develop new skills, learn from one another, and support one another within vibrant learning school communities.

This proposed study begins with the findings of an initial pilot study (research phases one and two) on the work of SpEdTs during COVID-19 stay home orders. The pilot study lays the context to understand how SpEdTs completed their work, provided instruction, and interacted with their students and families. The study then extends into the following school year (research

phase three) to examine the experiences of SpEdTs as they returned to their schools the next school year. The design of this study attempts to make meaning of the work of SpEdTs during the unanticipated conditions of the health pandemic and the readapting required to restructure special education programming. The findings aim to impact teacher retention and ultimately contribute to the field of special education.

Research Questions

I adopted the following question to conduct my study: How do Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services? I adopted the following sub-questions to support my research study:

1. How did SpEdTs provide specialized instruction and monitor student learning during COVID-19 distance learning and what students (e.g., age, the severity of a disability, geographic location) accessed distance learning?
2. How did SpEdTs establish relationships, communicate with, and collaborate with parents regarding their children's IEP and provision of specialized instruction during COVID-19 distance learning?
3. How did SpEdTs cope with, manage, and adapt to the responsibilities during COVID-19 distance learning? What resources proved helpful in adapting to the change(s)?
4. In what ways, if any, has the work and instructional practice of SpEdTs changed due to COVID-19 experiences? How did SpEdTs readjust their work and instructional practice (including the use of instructional and digital technology) in the school setting post-pandemic (or continued pandemic) conditions?

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous: An instructional approach using technology and programs. Asynchronous instruction is designed to provide learning activities to students to complete independently without the presence of a teacher. Learning activities may include pre-recorded instructional videos, virtual field trips, or instructional technology or applications.

Contingency Learning Plans: A revised protocol and paperwork used by many districts during the 2020 – 2021 school year. This individualized plan outlines specialized services across multiple possible instructional models (e.g., fully online, hybrid model, face-to-face). The plan includes information on how, when, and the amount of instructional services provided according to each specific instructional model. This plan is completed in agreement by a student special education team. It acts as a temporary instructional road map for specialized instruction and services for the students Individualized Educational Program (IEP) during health pandemic programming.

Co-located Instruction: Simultaneous instruction provided by a teacher while hosting both students in the classroom setting (face-to-face) and students using a virtual meeting platform (e.g., Zoom, WebEx).

COVID-19: A new coronavirus virus first diagnosed in 2019. The virus causes upper respiratory tract illnesses (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The disease has similar symptoms as the flu, in addition to possible change in taste or smell. Many individuals may develop symptoms two to five days after being infected with the disease and remain contagious up to 14 days later. The virus spreads between individuals in close contact by droplets made from the illness (e.g., cough, sneeze or talk). Symptoms for individuals can be severe or lethal, especially for older adults, individuals with underlying medical conditions, and pregnant women. Although children

are not considered high-risk for the disease, some infected with the illness are at higher risk for Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C). MIS-C is also possible for individuals other than children. The disease MIS-C is a serious respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological disease. Currently, health officials recommend preventative measures in wearing a mask and social distancing, since there is no vaccine to prevent the disease. Ongoing and current research prevails on COVID-19.

Distance Learning: A format for instruction where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom, instead teachers use other forms of interaction and communication (e.g., instructional technology, phone, email, instructional packets) to engage students in learning.

Distance Learning Plans: An individualized plan outlining specialized services using a distance learning format. The plan includes information on how, when, and the amount of instructional services provided. This plan is completed in agreement by a student special education team. It acts as a temporary instructional road map for specialized instruction and services for the students Individualized Educational Program (IEP).

Face-to-Face Instruction: In-person instruction in a classroom or instructional settings during the typical school calendar.

Hybrid Instruction: A mixed mode of instruction. Students complete a portion of their instructional day or week completing fully online instruction and a portion of their instructional day or week face-to-face in the school setting.

Individualized Educational Program (IEP): An instructional plan developed by a special education student team. The IEP outlines annual instructional goals and special education services. The IEP mitigates educational needs in academic areas and social, emotional, behavioral areas as determined by a comprehensive special education evaluation and redesigned

annually to attend to the current functional level of the student. The development of an IEP must adhere to due process regulations to protect the individual student's educational rights.

Pandemic: An outbreak of a disease or a new virus spreading worldwide. Due to the lack of pre-existing immunity, the virus infects people and spreads expeditiously (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

Special Education Teacher (SpEdT): A teacher providing specialized services to a student identified to receive special education services. A SpEdT manages a caseload or class list of students, providing direct instructional support in the general education classroom or a separate classroom or instructional setting. SpEdTs also provide indirect instructional support by consulting with or collaborating with other IEP team members (e.g., school administrators, teachers, related service personnel, paraprofessionals, parents). SpEdT instructional responsibilities include academic and non-academic areas (e.g., social, emotional, behavioral instruction and support) as determined by each student IEP. SpEdTs specialize in differentiating instruction to meet the individual needs of learners.

Social Distancing: The act of providing physical distance between one individual and another individual (e.g., six feet apart) to prevent the spread of infectious disease.

Special Education Student Team: A collection of individuals who collaborate on special educational programming for an individual student. The special education team includes the student's parent or guardian, a school district representative, special education teacher and general education classroom teacher. The special education team members may include the student, or any other professionals or advocate invited and agreed upon by the student's parent or guardian.

Stay-at-Home Order: A peacetime emergency executive order as issued by a governor to stay at home due to the declaration of a health pandemic and the widespread infection of disease. For example, the stay home order in Minnesota directed all residents to defer from out of state travel and stay at home unless needing to participate in essential activities. The state outlined a plan for safety based on the type of business and identified what allowances were permitted.

Synchronous Instruction: Instructional meeting or class session conducted using a virtual platform. Students attend and engage in the class session from home or environment other than the actual classroom setting.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

My study concerns the impact of the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way special education teachers (SpEdTs) provide special education services, during face-to-face school closures and their work in the following school year. To attend to the factors impacting the work of SpEdTs in pandemic conditions, I organized my review of the literature into four themes: (1) Online and Distance Learning; (2) Collaboration with Families; (3) Managing the Work and Coping; and (4) Collegial Support and Professional Development. Each theme required specific key search terms to align with my review. Table 2.1 outlines the literature themes and keywords used.

Table 2.1

Literature review themes and keywords

Literature Themes	Keywords
Online and Distance Learning	Special Education, and Universal Design for Learning, fully online learning, distance learning, programming outside of the school
Collaboration with Families	Special Education, and collaboration with families, family centered, family partnerships, distance learning
Managing the Work and Coping	Special education teacher, and retention, managing the workload, coping strategies Coping strategies for stress, and Working with children Compassion fatigue, and special education
Collegial Support and Professional Development	Special education, and Collegial support, Professional Learning Communities Teaching, and Online learning communities

I accessed primarily three databases in my literature search. Additional literature was discovered by reviewing the reference list of relevant studies. I also included literature retrieved from my professional reading library. I reviewed approximately 90 articles and five books to complete a review of the content and analytical literature for my dissertation.

Online and Distance Learning

In this first section, I describe the federal rights of students identified with disabilities to access instruction and the alignment to the concept of Universal Design for Learning. Next, I describe fully online programming and the implications for students with disabilities. Last, I report teacher experience teaching fully online before COVID-19 school closings.

Accessing Instruction and Universal Design for Learning

Since the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975, public schools acknowledged the rights and privileges for students with disabilities. The original tenets of the federal law mandated equal access to education or a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). These rights continue to resonate in the protections outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) in effect today. Over the years, additional federal mandates reshaped the landscape of school initiatives and programming. Federal regulation, such as the enacted Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), ensure effective educational programming for all students. These current regulations work in harmony to ensure high academic expectations for each student attending public schools.

The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aligns with the spirit and the charge of our federal requirements to educate all students effectively. UDL invites a framework for designing environments and products usable by all people. The implementation of UDL in the classroom assumes a proactive approach in developing a learning environment, activities, and

assessments accessible to all learners (CAST, 2020). Instructional technology can support student engagement and enhance learning (Brunvand & Byrd, 2011). Although instructional technology aligns with the principles of UDL, technology may not be used broadly in the classroom. According to Hicks (2011), teachers are resistant to using technology in the classroom. Even teachers having computer experience, claim they are not comfortable with using the technology in the school (Wood et al., 2005). Teacher ease with using technology, or lack of, is worth noting as districts shift to using technology creatively in educational programming.

Fully Online Instruction

Fully online instruction is provided remotely via web-based technologies or instructional applications (Hashley & Stahl, 2014). Teachers may assign asynchronous assignments by directing students to view teacher recorded lectures or complete activities via an external computerized program (e.g., Khan Academy). Synchronous technology allows a platform for students to meet with the teacher in a virtual meeting space during class time. This approach supports social interaction or social presence between a teacher and students, or student to student interaction (Baker, 2010). Fully online programs may integrate asynchronous and synchronous formats, providing students with multiple ways to access the content. Teachers use audio, video, or text, to design a more personalized approach to instruction in online schooling (Smith & Harvey, 2014). By integrating the principles of UDL and a variety of instructional methods, fully online schools appear to be a viable option for educational programming.

Although online learning may be a feasible approach, not all states or districts offer online learning options. According to a review of online policy and practice developed by Watson and colleagues (2012), 31 states provided fully online programs. In another study completed by the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities (2016), the number

of states offering public online schools was less, reporting 28 states. Regardless, there is evidence in growth for online or cyber school options (Picciano et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2012; Hashley & Stahl, 2014; Mann et al., 2016). A study conducted in Pennsylvania reported a variety of cyber schools available within the state and an equal representation of students with disabilities enrolled in online schools (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). However, Smith and Harvey (2014) reported a lack of underrepresentation of students with disabilities enrolled in online schools. According to Hashley and Stahl (2014), fully online schools may report high numbers of students identified with disabilities; nonetheless, the enrollment is about half of the students with disabilities enrolled in traditional face to face schools. There appears to be inconsistent data in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in online learning programs. Besides, the literature omits information on the severity and the specificity of disability types. The evidence suggests that districts may not be prepared to teach all students using a fully online approach.

The work of teaching online is different than teaching in a face-to-face classroom environment (Smith & Basham, 2014). According to Smith and Basham (2014), many fully online teachers rely on external programs provided through external vendors. Although these external programs may adhere to the federal guidelines of access for individuals with disabilities, this access doesn't extend to a student's cognitive level (Smith & Basham, 2014). In effect, these digital tools may ignore the necessary specialized instruction a student with disabilities may need to mitigate gaps in developmental skills or knowledge (Greer, 2014).

In some cases, SpEdTs determine the curriculum for students needing intensive intervention using other digital tools, including phone conversations and virtual meeting platforms (Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities, 2016). Students requiring special education services need instructional modification or remediation, and this differentiation

is often dependent on the interaction between the SpEdT, student and parent (Coy, 2014). Furthermore, the family's involvement is critical to the success of supporting online instruction (Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). Coy (2014) recommends management approaches, including a daily and weekly schedule and physical space in the teacher's home to manage weekly tasks and responsibilities (p. 114). In addition to instructional duties and mandated special education paperwork, frequent communication with students and parents and time to collaborate with colleagues is required throughout the SpEdTs online duties (Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities, 2016).

Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) surveyed teachers across the United States and Norway to assess teacher's readiness to transition to fully online instruction in the beginning weeks of COVID-19. Given the 239 responses from the United States (US), 95% of the teachers reported no previous online teaching (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). Across both Norway and the US, teachers reported some prior experience with digital tools, yet lacked training on how digital technology transferred to instruction (p. 244). According to Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020), teachers reported a positive attitude and willingness to “go the extra mile” from face-to-face teaching to online platforms. They recommended more research on how teachers might apply positive attitudes and strategies for coping when face to face instruction becomes available in the fall (p. 245).

In this section, I described the federal rights of students identified with disabilities to access instruction and the alignment to the concept of Universal Design for Learning. Then, I described fully online programming and the implications for students with disabilities. Last I conveyed the prior experience of teachers to teach fully online. Given the legal protections afforded to parents of students receiving special education services, it is essential to explore

parent participation in their child's educational programming by exploring different aspects of fully online programming and the required shift to distance learning. In the next section, I examine the school and parent relationship.

Collaboration with Families

In this next section, I examine the elements of school and parent collaboration. First, I explain the parents' role in a special education program. Next, I present models for school-family partnerships and the collaboration required to support a student with disabilities in online programming. Last, I describe a model for empowering parents with cultural or linguistic differences as they engage in planning and programming of their child with special education needs.

The Parent's Role in Their Child's Special Education Program

The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) defines parent involvement in their child's special education program. This policy mandates the school to collaborate with the parents (or guardian) of a child receiving special education services. Avendano and Cho (2020), summarized the seven essential elements outlined in IDEA to guide school and family collaboration: (a) open communication between schools and parents; (b) parent involvement in in planning in decision from early or pre-intervention through transition from the school setting; (c) the importance of parent involvement in intervention, educational services and transition; (d) provision of parent rights in their child's program; (e) parents assistance to develop skills to engage in their students education; (f) schools support parents as partners throughout their child's educational programming; and (g) schools will provide support to parents with cultural or linguistic barriers to engage in programming (p.251). These elements are integrated into the work SpEdTs and parents complete together throughout the school year.

Models for partnering with parents while integrating elements outlined in IDEA can serve as examples for teachers and parents. Next, I will present collaborative work for early childhood and school-age special education programming and relevant considerations to support effective collaboration between schools and families.

Models for Collaborating with Parents

For early childhood special educators, working with the family is imperative to effective early intervention. A family-centered approach assumes equal partnership between the school professionals and parents or family (Gallagher et al., 2004). Typically, a family-centered approach requires the special educator to visit the home of a student. By observing parent and child interactions and discussing parent needs, a SpEdT can collaborate with the parent to identify useful supports, resources and guidance needed to support student development (Mahoney & Bella, 1998). A family-centered approach provides the conditions for schools and families to work together to enhance student developmental outcomes. School programs can use a family-centered approach to engage parents in identifying useful support and resources for instructional activities within the home setting (Gallagher et al., 2004).

For typical school age students, regular home visits are not practical. Instead, teachers interact with parents from the school setting, working to develop a trusting family-school partnership. According to a study conducted by Francis et al. (2016), trusting family-school partnership require several conditions: (1) a sense of school community where parents are welcome; (2) positive school administrative leadership; (3) respectful, competent and committed teachers skilled in communication; and (4) opportunities for family involvement in the school. The mutual goal of working together to impact student educational outcomes is essential (Mahoney & Bella, 1998; Francis et al., 2016). Working towards mutual student goals required

careful interaction between parents and teachers, especially when implementing school interventions in the home (Bowen, 1999). Bowen (1999) identified difficulties in the agreement between parents and schools. This study highlighted a change in teacher perceptions of student capabilities and parental knowledge of their child's learning profiles by increasing interactions between teachers and parents. Bowen also suggested the effectiveness of a school-family liaison to support school and family communications, ensuring follow through with resources to the parent (1999, p.44).

In rural communities, school and family collaboration in the home or school may not be viable due to excessive travel time due to distance or challenges with parent transportation. Teleconferencing in rural communities may provide more equitable services for families, yet presents obstacles requiring solutions (Buchter & Ringleman, 2018). According to IDEA (2004), schools need to adhere to the rights and protections afforded to students receiving special education services and their families. Privacy and confidentiality outlined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protect personal student information and information of the family. However, educational laws have not yet detailed how FERPA guidelines apply to virtual meetings or other synchronous formats to communicate with families (Buchter & Ringleman, 2018).

Parent and Teacher Partnership in Online Learning

Parental access to technology can create barriers for special educators who pursue teleconferencing options with families (Buchter & Ringleman, 2018). According to Currie-Rubin and Smith (2014), parent interaction with the online SPEDT using email or phone is vital since parents play a primary role in ensuring students in elementary through middle school engage in and complete online lessons. Parents or other family members assist the student in attending to

the identified online content and provide assistance and guidance for online activities (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, Coy (2014) advises parents or their family members to act as learning coaches for the student (p. 112). In addition to communicating areas of struggle for the student, the learning coach is vital to the students' educational team by monitoring the students' use of time and ensuring the student is working in an appropriate home setting (Coy, 2014). Students with disabilities need more opportunities to talk about their work, seek assistance, and get the necessary feedback to persist in their online schoolwork (Rice & Greer, 2014). It is essential to note the vital role of the parent and family in interacting with the SPEDT to support the student in online learning. This partnership is critical to the success of online programming for students with disabilities (Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014).

School and Family Partnerships for All Students

Educators typically generate the parameters for communicating and working with families. In effect, the school's values are often at the center of the relationship (Olivos et al., 2010). According to The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce (2016) report, the public-school educator workforce is overwhelmingly white (82%), yet the student population continues to increase in diversity. Between 2014 and 2026, enrollment predictions propose a decrease of 6% for White students and 67% for students from other races (Projections of Education Statistics to 2026 45th Edition, 2018). Given the differences in the current educator workforce demographics and the races and cultures represented in students, educators need to align their values more closely with the cultures represented in the students and families they work with (Olivos et al., 2010). According to Hsiao et al. (2018), educators need to move beyond developing school-family relationships and strive towards empowering parents in the collaborative relationship. These authors outlined four critical components educators need to

address, to enhance parental empowerment in the family-school relation. Parents should take on the roles of (1) Ecocultural entities; (2) Critical reflectors; (3) Participatory change agents; and (4) Advocates over time (pp. 45-46). These components represent a more equitable model opposed to a coercive approach for collaborating with parents. By emphasizing an ecocultural factor, educators assume alignment to the neighborhood and community culture to enhance a deeper understanding of mutual student outcomes.

In this section, I explored examples for collaborating with parents. I began by explaining the parents' role in special education programming. Next, I presented school and parent partnership models across age levels, demographics and programs. Then, I shared research on the required parent and school relationship in online learning. Last, I presented school and family collaboration through an inclusive or more equitable lens. However, the school-parent relationship is only one aspect of the many responsibilities required for SpEdTs. In the next section, I examine multiple demands in the role of the SpEdT and the impact on managing the work and coping with work related stress.

Managing the Work and Coping

In this section, I describe the difficulty in managing the various SpEdT responsibilities and tasks. Next, I examine work-related stress and coping. Last, I describe viewpoints and factors for SpEdT burnout.

Managing the Work

The responsibilities of a special educator are different than their general education colleagues (Bettini et al., 2018). SpEdTs are required to plan instruction, differentiate across multiple grades or subjects, and manage other important duties, including due process paperwork (Jones et al., 2013). Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010), observed 36 SpEdTs across multiple

special education programs and determined on the average, SpEdTs spend 15.6% of their time in instruction, 14.6 % on instructional support, 12.1% on paperwork, 9.4% on personal time, 8.6% on consulting and collaborating, 7.9% on other responsibilities, 7.2% on supervision, 7.0% on behavior, and 5.4% on planning. Given the number of various responsibilities, SPEDTs have difficulty managing the workload (Morvant et al., 1995; Bettini et al., 2017; Bettini et al., 2017; Samuels, 2018). SpEdTs can experience reduced energy levels and less engagement in work resulting in high levels of stress and burnout in their beginning years of teaching (Bettini et al., 2017). According to Benjamin and Black (2012), the setting for novice SpEdTs is high risk and trauma producing. Unfortunately, many teachers leave the field due to high levels of stress (Hagaman & Casey, 2017).

Coping with Stress

According to the study conducted by Carton and Fruchart (2014), elementary level teachers described different stressors and different approaches to coping with stress throughout their careers. For beginning teachers (1 – 6 years of teaching experience), student behavior is the most stressful aspect of their work. At mid-career (7- 35 years), parent relationships are the most significant source of stress. New educational directives or initiatives within the profession enhanced stress for teachers at the end of their careers (p.252). In this study, approaches for coping with stress were also different based on the years of experience teaching. Teachers newer to the field sought out social resources to approach the stressors more directly (p. 256). Teachers with more experience tended to use avoidance behaviors to cope with stress, including “sleeping, smoking or eating more when they were stressed” (p. 257).

Cancio and colleagues (2018), conducted a study to examine how SpEdTs cope with work-related stress. In this study, SpEdTs across four states rated job satisfaction and identified

strategies used by SpEdTs to manage job-related stress. The two highest ranking indicators of stress were being tired from work and taking home problems from the school day (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 467). In this study, SpEdTs identified seeking support from others, listening to music, and attending staff development activities as the three highest ranking strategies for coping with the stress (Cancio et al., 2018, p. 468).

The individual teacher's ability to cope with work-place stress is one perspective explaining SpEdT burnout. According to Brittle (2020), special educators experiencing burnout exhibit disengagement and exhaustion. This researcher reports that maladaptive coping strategies influence risk for poor psychological health, therefore monitoring SpEdTs coping response is worthy of attention. Compassion fatigue is another cause of SpEdT burnout. The concept of compassion fatigue originated as an explanation for burnout in the caregiving professions (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue is a form of secondary trauma brought on by the caregiver or SpEdTs care of their students (Hoffman et al, 2007). Overall, these perspectives suggest that the individual may control stress by developing personal and more effective coping approaches.

Another way to understand SpEdT burnout suggests an environmental or work-related perspective. According to Brunsting and colleagues (2014), school or work-related factors such as role dissonance or conflict may influence burnout. Gersten and colleagues (2001) examined multiple aspects of the work environment, including professional support, professional role development, opportunities for new learning, and years of teaching to understand better SpEdTs intent to stay or leave the profession. Findings from their study identified a positive school culture including administrative and collegial support and opportunities professional development key to retaining SpEdTs.

In this section, I described the complexity of the SpEdT workload and the impact on stress and attrition. Next, I described stressors and approaches to cope with stress at different levels of teaching experience. Finally, I examined stressors, coping strategies, and viewpoints on SpEdTe burnout. Relying on colleagues for support was identified in the three studies reviewed (Gersten et al., 2001, Carton & Fruchart, 2014; Cancio et al., 2018). In the next section, I will explore how collegial relationships support retention and professional development in schools.

Collegial Support and Professional Development

Developing a school culture of collaboration and opportunities for SpEdTs to interact and work with other teachers supports SpEdT retention (Benjamin & Black, 2012; Bettini et al., 2018; Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Special educators' value meaningful work and find benefits in a supportive professional community (Benjamin & Black, 2012). Findings from the Brunsting (2014) meta-analysis study on SpEdT burnout, reported collegial support a preventive measure. Special educators also rely on their colleagues' support to help them manage the work and reduce stress (Bettini et al., 2018; Cancio et al., 2018). Next, I describe collegial support and a structure schools use to enhance professional development through Professional Learning Communities.

Collegial Support

According to Singh and Billingsley (1998), teachers value peer support more than administrative support. Special educators perceive collegial support key to remaining in the field (Jones et al., 2013). Yet the opportunity for SpEdTs to collaborate with their general education peers is not always available (Strogilos et al., 2012). In a study completed by Hagaman and Casey (2017), SpEdTs were unable to find the support of a colleague. They relied on the interactions and support of their paraprofessionals (Hagaman & Casey, 2017). Bettini and colleagues (2018) noted fewer opportunities for SpEdTs to work with colleagues than general

education teachers (GenEdTs). In the study, SpEdTs reported working on instruction with colleagues two to three times per month (or less), while GenEdTs worked with colleagues weekly (Bettini et al., 2018). Caron and McLaughlin (2002) studied the work of teachers in six high achieving schools. The study identified practices of a collaborative culture present in each of the schools they examined (Caron & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 297), confirming positive student outcomes for students in collective learning communities. Next, I present examples of professional learning communities to support collegial support and professional development.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a viable professional development structure in schools, increasing teacher and student learning (Vescio et al., 2008). PLCs meet regularly in grade level, content area, or professional interest area faculty groups. According to Pugach et al. (2009), few studies attend to the involvement of novice SpEdTs in PLCs. Beginning SpEdTs are at risk of being marginalized or isolated from other teachers (Jones et al., 2013). PLCs create an opportunity for teachers to demonstrate leadership skills and support one another (Dooner et al., 2008). These learning communities provide a forum for teachers to engage in instructional decisions by using inquiry-based processes and peer feedback (Dooner et al., 2008; Popp & Goldman, 2016). PLCs may provide a potential for nurturing professional relationships more naturally since these professional development meetings are scheduled routinely within the school calendar (Pugach et al., 2009).

For schools not offering a PLC structure, an online network may be a source of teacher professional development (Macia & Garcia, 2016). During the initial weeks of COVID-19, search terms used most frequently in education support sites suggested an urgency for teachers to learn new forms of digital communication (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020). According to Hur and

Brush (2009), teachers participate in informal online communities to (a) share emotions; (b) find advantage from the online community; (c) reduce teacher isolation; (d) explore new ideas; and (e) experience a sense of community (p. 291). A review of the literature conducted by Macia and Garcia (2016) on online learning communities, also reports the benefits of online learning communities for teachers due to robust participation. However, the authors convey a current lack of research on the impact of online networking on teacher professional development (p. 305).

In this section, I described the importance of collegial support to reduce SpEdT stress. I also examined face to face and online professional learning communities as possible resources for collegial support and professional development.

Summary, Gaps and Tensions in the Literature

Given a review of the literature across the four themes explored, I discovered gaps and tensions in the literature. Next, I will identify various areas worthy of continued research. I provide suggestions across the four areas examined.

Provision and Access of Distance Learning

Although the prevalence of fully online programs is increasing (Picciano et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2012; Hashley & Stahl, 2014; Mann et al., 2016), there is variability in the states offering fully online programs and the students enrolled in the programs (Smith & Harvey, 2014). Online programs may be suitable options for students with disabilities, yet the current literature does not delineate specific information on student disability types or severity of disabilities.

Collaboration with Families

Although parent and SpEdT collaboration are mandated (IDEA, 2004), there are no models for parent and teacher partnerships in stay home pandemic conditions. Currently, SpEdTs

must rely on the literature on fully online programs, when including students with disabilities and their families (Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014; Rice & Greer, 2014). Lack of clear guidelines on how student and family rights are protected when teleconferencing with parents also creates tensions in the field (Buchter & Ringleman, 2018).

Managing the Work and Coping

Given the unprecedented COVID-19 school closures, teachers will require support in managing new online teaching practices and coping with changes as they re-enter physical classrooms. There is limited current literature on how SpEdTs cope with stress effectively. One study conducted by Cancio and colleagues (2018), provided coping responses in broad terms (e.g., seeking support from others, listening to music, and attending staff development activities). One perspective of SpEdT burnout emphasized the individual, while another considered work-related environmental factors. More research is needed to better understand what factors influence SpEdT burnout and what changes are necessary to support teacher retention.

Ongoing SpEdT Professional Support and Development

There is limited research on how online learning communities impact teacher professional development (Macia & Garcia, 2016). Given the need to consult virtual learning communities during COVID-19 stay home orders and the uncertainties for P-12 schools, it may be essential to learn more about the support and resources SpEdTs secure through online resources and the implications for professional development (Cavanaugh & Deweese, 2020; Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

I identified four factors impacting the work of special educators at the onset of the health pandemic. In a review of the literature presented, I found gaps and tensions across all four areas.

The uniqueness of the novel COVID-19 disease suggests many areas worthy of further examination, which I hope to answer as I proceed forward into my study.

Analytical Theories

In this next section, I shift my lens by exploring relevant conceptual frames to deepen my literature review. In my study, I aim to answer my research questions by examining the work of SpEdTs during unusual circumstances. Under typical conditions, managing multiple responsibilities is often stress-producing (Morvant et al., 1995; Bettini et al., 2017; Bettini et al., 2017; Samuels, 2018). I adopted Noddings (1984) ethic of care to explain why SpEdTs continue to put tremendous energy into the work given the complexities of their role. Then, I examine a framework for organizational trauma developed by Vivian and Hormanns (2013). According to Benjamin and Black (2012), the work setting is high risk and trauma-producing. By examining the literature using an organizational trauma lens, I hope to understand special educators' work from a systemic stance.

Ethic of Care (Noddings)

Noddings (1984) ethic of care theory is a relational framework. At its fundamental level, the carer (one providing care) and the one cared for exemplifies an ethic of care (Noddings, 2012b). Noddings' work is grounded in Martin Buber's (1965) moral or basic ethical principles of individual growth through relations with others. Noddings (1984) conveys this ethic of care as moral, for caring is conceivably at the onset or pre-act without consideration of reciprocal response. In addition, Noddings imparts caring as "natural and accessible to all human beings" (1984, p. 28). In the caring relationship, the carer remains attentive, receptive and empathic to the cared for (Noddings, 2012b). Special educators may be drawn to the work given natural tendencies in caring for others. This is evident in the work they do. The special educator works

as an advocate for their students and cares for the programming required. This care includes a need to collaborate with others to ensure student programming. For example, SpEdTs depended on the relationships and collaboration of parents to promote access and engagement to fully online learning (Coy, 2014; Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). To be cared for, the carer needs to be genuinely responsive to the needs of others. The act of caring requires listening and thinking to build a relationship of care and trust (Noddings, 2012b, p. 775). Special educators not only develop relationship with their students, they are dependent on working with the parents of their students. This is especially important in fully online models.

According to Noddings, reciprocity is a component of the caring relationship. Reciprocity is not a crude exchange of goods or deeds. Instead, Noddings refers to the “mutual recognition and appreciation of the response” (Noddings, 2012b, p.53). This recognition of care acknowledges the uneven balance of power between two people. For example, there is an imbalance in the teacher and student relationship. The teacher has more authority as the one assigning grades. According to Noddings (2012b), care ethics still apply in this situation and exemplified in relational care by the student's response when being cared for by the teacher. Noddings ethic of care assumes John Dewey’s concept of continuity as a means to develop an authentic educational experience (Noddings, 2012a, p. 776). The idea of continuity suggests the need to establish a relationship over time by connecting past experiences with future experiences. For example, SpEdTs are often allowed to work with a student, across multiple years. This continuity of services enhances a SpEdTs ability to meet the student's needs more effectively over time and develop genuine relationship of care.

Many of the concepts weaved within Noddings ethic of care apply to the instruction work of SpEdTs. Although SpEdTs may only spend 15.6% of their time in instruction with their

students (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), their work attends to the individual. Multiple shared experiences between teacher and student shape the relationship. Over time, the teacher (carer) learns to understand both expressed needs and the more implicit needs of the student (cared for).

Perhaps stress is enhanced due to the inability of the SpEdT to perceive reciprocity from their students. This lack of reciprocity induces stress and burn out. SpEdTs who remain in the field may recognize reciprocity as expressed in the academic or social-emotional growth their students. Perhaps this student growth is why they work to manage the multiple tasks in their work. SpEdTs do the work because they care for their students.

Noddings explains care for colleagues in *The Challenge for Care in Schools* (2005) by suggesting colleagues stay in the conversation long enough to determine a mode or means to provide support. Again, Noddings' essential components of the carer as attentive, receptive and empathic become forms of support for a colleague. Noddings suggests careful listening when supporting a colleague to determine what a colleague truly needs (p. 103). For example, a colleague may need models, guidance, or merely attentive questioning to reach conclusions. Noddings' insertion of Dewey's concept of continuity also applies in the possible collegial relationship during COVID-19 distance learning. The professional experiences between teachers before distance learning and while in distance learning created an authentic shared experience for professionals. This shared experience supported the ability to carefully attend to and support one another as colleagues given a common knowledge and genuine struggle. Noddings' ethic of care explains the caring relationship or collegial support SpEdTs desire to manage the work and reduce stress (Benjamin & Black, 2012; Bettini et al., 2018; Singh & Billingsley, 1998).

Organizational Trauma (Vivian & Hormann)

There is a relationship between the work, the organizational culture, and the individuals attracted to the work (Vivian & Hormann, 2013). According to Vivian and Hormann, this relationship can create a bond to the organization's mission. However, they also contend that the work-culture relationship generates a negative work intensity that can lead to organizational trauma. Vivian and Hormann examined both the research on clinical trauma and organizational development to explain how systems negatively impact individuals (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Hormann & Vivian 2005; Vivian & Hormann 2012, 2015). In effect, organizations themselves can be traumatized and demonstrate patterns that influence traumatization for the individuals who are a member of the organization. Using several of the concepts within this premise, I will examine the relationship between the work of special educators and organizational trauma.

The Dynamic Organizational Trio

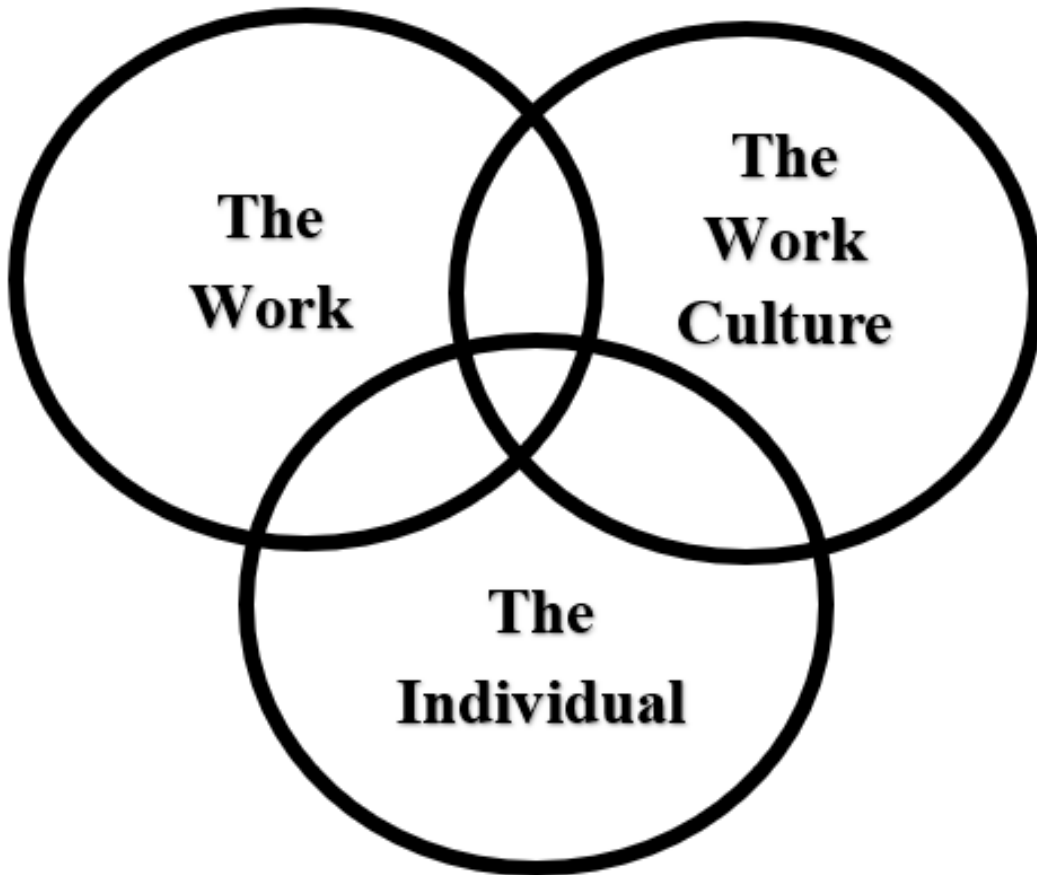
According to Vivian and Hormann (2013), an interconnected relationship exists between the work required within an organization and the work culture. They propose that the kind of work required of an organization influences the values, norms, or culture within an organization. In schools, the mission is often to teach the students; therefore, the organizational culture would inspire learning, development, and growth. Schools develop processes for teachers to meet in professional learning communities, grade-level teams, or even in school or district-wide professional development activities. This professional growth then transfers into their teaching practice by developing effective approaches to impact student achievement.

In addition to the work and work culture, Vivian and Hormann posit that specific individuals are drawn to the work because of the work culture's reinforcing nature. In other

words, teachers are learners themselves. The individual, the work, and the work culture interconnect within an organization to compose a *dynamic organizational trio*. See Figure 2.1. Together the three components can create a positive synergy. In schools, the positive dynamic results in a welcoming learning environment where both the adults and the students thrive and grow. In the current educational landscape, this positive dynamic or desired outcome is often measured in terms of student achievement.

Figure 2.1

Dynamic Organizational Trio



The Individual – The Special Educator

Special educators are a subset of educators in the field of teaching. Individuals attracted to the profession are drawn to learning organizations; however, they are also compelled to a work culture that thrives on individual care and specialization. The policies and processes within special education ensure individual care and accountability for individual educational outcomes. An ethic of care drives the mission and values of the system of special education.

The Work – Specialized Services

Special educators deliver specially designed instruction and support their students to access in the learning environment, engage in activities and assessments aligning with UDL principles (CAST, 2020). Instructional approaches shifted quickly at the onset of the health pandemic and distance learning. Teacher ease with using technology, or lack of, is worth noting as districts required distance learning or fully online instruction due to public health restrictions. Hartshore and colleagues (2020), suggested multiple variables impacting fully online learning during COVID-19 stay home orders. This study aims to study the rapid shift in the use and implementation of online instruction, especially for SpEdTs teaching students requiring intensive intervention and instruction.

The Work Culture – Collaboration and Accountability

According to Vannest and Hagan-Burke (2010), less than half of a SpEdTs time is dedicated to teaching. This presents an interesting perspective on the role of the special educator and may lead to role ambiguity. Special educators rely on the support of their colleagues to manage their work (Bettini et al., 2018; Cancio et al., 2018), Furthermore, the support of colleagues reduces stress and burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014; Gersten, 2001). Most of the workload is managing the individual programs or specialized services for their learners. This

management requires collaboration with colleagues and parents. The work culture demands a setting of collaboration and teamwork.

According to Vivian and Hormann, the inter-related aspects of the individual, the work, and the work culture can form a positive synergy within an organization. Within a special education system, positive organizational synergy impacts individual student growth and represents accountability to the unique goals for each student outlined on their individualized educational program (IEP). Vivian and Hormann (2013) also contend that the intensity resulting from the organizational trio can also be harmful, influencing trauma within the organization and ultimately impacting the individuals within the organization (p.7). Next, I describe organizational trauma and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizational Trauma.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, schools across the nation locked their doors and constructed systems to enhance security within their school. Districts wrote policies for screening visitors for entrance. They also developed processes and procedures for routine active shooter drills. The shift from open school doors to lock and stay put resulted from the multiple school districts responding to their shocked and grieving students and families. Organizations or systems can be traumatized (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Hormann & Vivian 2005; Kahn 2005; Stein 2004; Vivian & Hormann 2012, 2015; Volkan 2004). These changes in the school building and school procedures exemplify how our educational system was traumatized. Regardless of the school location, districts mandated physical changes to school buildings, policies, processes, and routines. School districts set these precautions in place to promote school safety in the event of a perpetrator. I am not presenting this example to minimize the trauma and loss experienced by many communities who experienced the horrific event of a

school shooting. I am offering this example to emphasize that organizations or systems can experience trauma, which impacts the work culture, the work, and the individuals themselves who are members.

The novel disease required school districts to respond rapidly by closing school doors and abiding with state issued stay-at-home orders. The single event of the COVID-19 health pandemic reaching local school districts as well as the prevailing uncertainty in how schools would restructure in the upcoming 2020 – 2021 school year (Superville, 2020), also supported possible trauma to the educational system and schools.

The Susceptibility of Trauma for the Special Educator

Many special educators are attracted to the profession given a genuine value in caring for others. This concept relates to Noddings (1984) ethic of care as presented earlier in this chapter. Special educators find themselves in sensitive situations. For example, students or their families may share very personal information. Some SpEdTs work with students exhibiting aggressive behaviors and need to de-escalate the behavior to mitigate harm to themselves or others. Regardless of the training or experience in the field, special educators are human. A natural tendency in caring for others may result in internalizing anxiety or secondary traumatic stress. Individuals drawn to the profession are susceptible to trauma, given their values, commitment, or desire for caring about others.

The unique demands of teaching during COVID-19 may have placed SpEdTs at an increased risk of experiencing high-stress levels while managing their work and adapting to the necessary changes. Due to the mandates of social distancing during COVID-19, teachers were isolated from their professional community and relied on interacting with others using virtual platforms (Trust et al., 2020). Adapting to the changes within their work as online teachers

while experiencing limited access to daily professional and collegial support may produce traumatizing experiences for special educators.

Conclusion

I reviewed two concepts to help explain the literature and the unique characteristics of the work of special education teachers (SpEdTs). An ethic of care permeates the work of a special educator. Assuming a caretaking role my suggest risk for high levels of stress or trauma given the work of caring for others. I suggested that SpEdTs are susceptible to trauma. However, I hope to go deeper in my study to examine the work of special educators from a more comprehensive perspective. Using a wider lens of organizational trauma, I hope to explore the interrelatedness of the individual and the work culture. Current literature appears to address one or the other. I am interested in the interconnectedness of the two. Given the unprecedented health pandemic, school organizations face a tremendous challenge in educating their students, especially students with intensive learning needs. This phenomenon solicits examination of how special educators face the challenges and navigate special education programming regardless of the situation.

My research questions relate to gaps or tensions in the literature on fully online specialized instruction, collaborative work with families, managing and coping with the work, and the collaborative work culture. My study attends to my primary research question on the impact of the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) on the work of special educators. I hope the findings from my study will inform the larger special education system and the subsystems (e.g., local school districts, teacher preparation programs) who prepare and aim to retain educators in the high needs of special education.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

My research questions concern the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of the special educator. Using a mixed methods research method, I gathered data at various stages: (1) During spring 2020 pandemic distance learning; (2) Immediately after spring 2020 pandemic distance learning; and (3) During the succeeding school year. Over one year (spring 2020 – spring 2021), this study aims to make meaning of the SpEdTs experience of responding to health pandemic conditions and their role and responsibilities as a special educator. By adopting a phenomenological framework for this study, this researcher aims to help us to understand the work of SpEdTs as they share their challenges, new learning and overall experiences throughout a very different era for our nation and our world. The SpEdTs ability to manage and adapt to the shifts in educational programming and the experiences of teaching special education in an unprecedented era are worthy of attention.

Mixed Methods Approach

I adopted a mixed methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative information to comprehensively study the work of SpEdTs. The research began during the initial onset of the pandemic and throughout the following school year. This researcher collected information on SpEdTs challenges, new learning and the adjustment from conventional face-to-face instruction to unprecedented shifts to distance, online, and other formats of instruction. Each phase of the study aimed to answer the first three research sub-questions: (1) How SpEdTs provided specialized instruction; (2) How SpEdTs interacted with parents; and (3) How SpEdTs managed and adjusted to the responsibilities during spring 2020 distance learning.

Phase Three attends to the fourth research sub-question, regarding the ways, if any, the SpEdT role and teaching practice changed due to COVID-19 experiences and SpEdTs re-

adjustment to providing special services in the school setting while in continued health pandemic conditions. A final synthesis of findings across each phase of this year long study aims to answer the primary research question on how Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services. Table 3.1 conveys a framework for the mixed method study, aligning with the data collection phases and schedule for data collection and analysis. In the next area, I continue to outline the intended implementation of a mixed methods approach to the study.

Table 3.1

Framework for Mixed Method Study

Phases of the Research Study	Type of Data Collection and Timeline	Methodology	Analysis Timeline
Phase One: During COVID-19 Distance Learning (Spring, 2020)	Survey disseminated May - June, 2020	Quantitative	Summer and Fall, 2020
Phase Two: Immediately after COVID-19 Distance Learning, (Summer, 2020)	Virtual Interviews, June - July, 2020	Qualitative	Winter, 2020 and Spring, 2021
Phase Three: Proceeding School Year (Fall 2020 – Spring, 2021)	Virtual Follow Up Interviews, October 2020; January/February 2021; May 2021	Qualitative	Spring and Summer, 2021

Quantitative Research

An anonymous survey was disseminated in the first phase of the study. The survey gathered information from a broad participant base (N=198) across a variety of Minnesota regions, including urban, suburban, town and rural areas. Survey results provided the prevalence of approaches used for distance learning and methods of interaction with students and parents. The survey also requested information on SpEdT coping styles and the resources SpEdTs identified as advantageous to managing and coping with the changes due to COVID-19 face-to-face school closing.

Qualitative Research

Next, qualitative data was gathered from a subset of survey participants (N=18) using semi-structured interviews after the close of the school year. The interviews presented a platform for SpEdTs to share their personal stories as they navigated distance learning within the context of the stay home order and how their experiences impacted their work as a special educator. Phase Three of the study gathered information on how four SpEdTs navigated the 2020-2021 school year. Data was gathered using documentation of teacher monthly logs and three interviews throughout the school year (fall, winter and spring). The data was collected throughout the school year as SpEdTs continued to navigate health pandemic conditions.

Institutional Review Board

I secured my CITI certificate in January of 2020 (Appendix 1). I applied for my first project and was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas, reference project number 1596347-1 (Appendix 2). I served as the principal investigator and a colleague was co-investigator on this study titled: *2020 Pandemic: Impact in the Role of the Special Education Teacher*. This initial project was designed as a pilot study.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was developed for approval early April in response to the stay home status and the mandate for schools to shift to distance learning mid-March. Most Minnesota schools began distance learning in the last week of March. SpEdT concerns with the transition appeared difficult; thus, the interest to move quickly with IRB approval to begin examining the extent of the problem seemed to be essential. The pilot study provided preliminary data on SpEdT levels of experience with online learning, approaches for communicating with parents, coping styles during COVID-19 distance learning and supportive resources identified by SpEdT. The pilot study also examined SpEdT experiences with distance learning instructional approaches, communication with families, and approaches for managing and adapting to the changes during the stay home order.

The IRB for this dissertation was revised to collect data from participants for the third phase of the study. The IRB included a need for data collection through participant logs and interviews with a small set of participants (N=4) throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The revised IRB was approved August 2020. An additional approval to continue the study was IRB approved March 2021 to secure data until the conclusion of the 2020-2021 public school year. I will refer to the phases in the study as Phase One and Two (both the initial pilot study) and the revised study as Phase Three.

Recruitment and Selection of Participants and Setting

The study was strategically designed, starting with participant selection and data collection. In Phase One, I invited participation across a broad base of Minnesota SpEdTs. Survey participants who completed the survey were also offered the opportunity to volunteer for a follow up interview. Using purposeful selection, willing participants across age/grade levels were identified for Phase Two interviews. Phase One and Two acted as a funnel to implement

purposeful selection of four participants representing specific demographics for more involved data collection in Phase Three of the study. Participants in Phase Three of the study were selected based on age/grade level of teaching, the severity of students they teach, gender and cultural/ethnic differences (self-identified in the Phase Two interviews).

Phase One

In Phase One of the study, recruitment entailed a survey invitation (Appendix 3) via state listservs to Minnesota special education professionals. The introduction to the survey describes the purpose of the study and informed consent to complete the survey (Appendix 3). See Appendix 4 for the survey questions. The survey was open for participation on May 8th through the end of the 2019-2020 school year on June 12, 2020. Minnesota licensed special educators (N=198) either provisionally licensed SpEdTs (7%) or fully licensed SpEdTs (93%) self-volunteered to complete the anonymous survey mid-April through mid-June 2020. Years of teaching experience ranged from one year through ten or more years of experience. See Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Phase One Participant Demographics

Gender	Years of Experience	School/District Location	Age/Grade Level	Severity of Disability
185 Female (93%)	6 Zero to One Years (3%)	30 Rural (15%)	24 Birth to 5 yrs (12%)	107 Mild to Moderate (54%)
12 Male (6%)	18 Two to Three Years (9%)	45 Town (23%)	101 Elem K-5 (51%)	72 Moderate to Severe (37%)
1 Unknown (0%)	9 Four to Five Years (4%)	64 Suburb (32%)	68 Middle/High School (34%)	19 Severe to Profound (9%)
	29 Six to Nine Years (15%)	52 Urban (26%)	5 Transition (3%)	
	136 Over Ten Years (69%)	7 Other (4%)		

Participant demographics were self-reported on the survey provided primarily limited response options. School locations indicated as “other” were self-reported by participants teaching in locations other than the survey choices provided. Participants provided additional information for their response selection. One participant taught in a prison setting, one participant taught at a virtual school, and one participant taught across a variety of demographic areas.

Phase Two

Survey participants were invited to self-volunteer for an interview by providing their contact information if interested. Providing contact information forfeited the anonymous nature of the survey results and is addressed in the ethical concerns section of this dissertation. From the initial 62 participants self-volunteering for the interview, 18 participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach.

A specific criterion for participant selection was implemented to differentiate the severity level of students on their caseload, age level of students, the demographics and location of their school or district. The diverse composition for interview participants maximized a comprehensive representation of the teacher experience and school settings. See Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Phase Two Participant Demographics

Gender	School/District Location	School Race Demographics	Severity of Disability
17 Female (94%)	6 Rural (33%)	11 Over 50% White (61%)	7 Mild to Moderate (39%)
1 Male (6%)	1 Town (6%)	6 Less 50% White (33%)	6 Moderate to Severe (33%)
	6 Suburb (33%)	1 Unknown (6%)	2 Mild to Severe (11%)
	2 Urban (11%)		3 Mild to Profound (17%)
	2 Other (11%)		

Interviews were completed virtually using Zoom technology after the close of the 2019-2020 school year (June and July). The interview aligned with the first three research sub-questions: (1) how they provided specialized instruction; (2) how they interacted with parents; and (3) how they managed and adjusted to the responsibilities during spring 2020 distance learning. See Appendices 5 and 6 for interview consent and interview questions.

Phase Three

In Phase Three of the study, I screened interview participants from Phase Two interviews to identify their interest for continued participation in the study. A primary purpose of this phase of the study was to describe how phenomenon manifested across different contexts” (Stake, 2006, p. 27). Participants were selected using homogeneous sampling of SpEdTs working with students identified with more significant disabilities. To examine the phenomena more closely across different contexts, participants were also selected across grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school levels and school program context (e.g., school organization and cultural context, age level, disability type program).

Participants were all SpEdTs who taught in federal setting level three programs for students identified with moderate to severe disabilities. Students receiving this level of programming spend most of their school day in a special education classroom setting receiving intensive specialized instruction and related services. Each participant taught across a specific age/grade level (elementary, middle school or high school level). Interview data across different grade levels provided more comprehensive information on how SpEdTs compare and differ in their work teaching students with intensive educational needs when faced with the restrictions placed on their school and special education program during a health pandemic.

In addition to the criterion previously suggested, participant selection also attended to teacher interest in engaging in the follow up phase of data collection throughout the duration of the 2020-2021 school year. Teacher participation in the study for this longer span of time was necessary to answer the fourth research sub-question on what ways if any, the role and teaching practice of SpEdTs changed due to COVID-19 experiences. See Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Phase Three Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	SpEdT Experience Teaching	Age/Grade Level
Jordan	Female	White	3 years	Elementary
Deno	Male	Latino	4 years	Elementary
Christine	Female	White	10 years	Middle School
Lizzy	Female	White	6 years	High School

At the time of the initial Phase Three participant recruitment, teachers and students were not sure of the conditions for beginning the 2020-2021 academic school year. Due to a continued concern in spreading the COVID-19 virus, social distancing requirements were present and considered an essential variable in data collection. In the next section, I outline data collection methods for each phase of the study adhering to public health guidelines provided during the pandemic to ensure safe conditions for myself as well as the participants.

Data Collection

I collected data across the three phases of the study using a mixed methods approach. In Phase One of the study, I collected quantitative data through a disseminated survey. In Phase Two and Three of the study, I collected qualitative data by completing interviews. Participant documentation was also included in Phase Three of the study. In this next section, I will expand on the approaches for data collection at each phase of the study.

Phase One Survey

Initial survey data was collected using Qualtrix (<https://qualtrics.com>). The anonymous survey data (see Appendix 4) gathered key identifying information from participants, including gender, age, type license (provisional or fully licensed), population of student (severity of disability and age or grade range), demographic location of the school. This information was essential to understand the demographics of participants.

The second section of the survey gathered information on platforms used for online instruction and other approaches used to provide instruction for distance learning. Methods and frequency of interactions with students and parents during distance learning was also surveyed to better understand the modes of communication at that time. Lastly, participants were asked to

report on the approaches used to complete IEPs given the inability to meet with parents or guardians face-to-face to complete the required due process work.

The third section of the survey attended to items on coping style. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), coping can be defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p.141). In this section of the survey, a definition of coping introduces the items taken from the COPE Brief (Carver, 1997). The full COPE assessment originally developed by Carver was a 60-item instrument used to measure coping responses aligned with the coping process (Lazarus & Folkman,1984). Carver reduced the items on the assessment due to prior impatience of individuals in completing the full assessment. The modified version of the instrument was published as a viable instrument and validated in research findings (Carver, 1997). The COPE Brief (Carver, 1997) is a validated 28-item assessment measuring 14 differentiated coping reactions (e.g., active coping, planning, positive refraining, self-distraction, denial). The intention of gathering this data for my study was to identify the coping responses of SpEdTs as they shifted their work from conventional face-to-face instruction to distance learning. Due to the sensitive nature of the survey questions on coping, participants were given the option to skip this section of the survey.

The final section of the survey pertained to what resources were helpful or not helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic face to face school closing. This intent of this question was to better understand if SpEdTs relied more on local support and resources or external resources as they navigated this unprecedented time. Throughout the entire survey, items were limited to the response options presented, therefore, restricting open responses from participants.

Phase Two Interviews

Phase Two included a semi-structured interview conducted with a smaller population of participants (N=18) via Zoom virtual technology. To begin the interview, SpEdTs introduced themselves by describing their role, the level and type of specialized services required and demographics of their school or district. The interview then shifted to six interview questions (see Appendix 6) pertaining to their work during COVID-19 distance learning. Participants shared experiences on their instructional work, the legal due process work, and their interaction with students and families. Interview questions also pertained to managing, adapting and coping with the changes to their role and the challenges in their work. In addition, participants were asked about the resources and support they considered helpful or not helpful. Interviews were conducted in a virtual meeting space and audio recorded. Full verbatim word by word transcripts were developed and used as data in this phase of the study.

Phase Three Documentation and Interviews

Phase Three included data collection from a smaller sample size (N=4) to gather in-depth information on the experiences of SpEdTs throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The intent of this phase of the study was to learn how these SpEdTs adjusted and recalibrated in their work as they provided intensive specialized services to their students during continued pandemic conditions. Phase Three data was collected in two ways using self-reported teacher documentation and interviews.

Participants used a life grid visual tool (see Appendix 7) to document significant experiences each month across four research areas: 1) Instructional Practice and Technology; 2) Parent/Guardian Collaboration and Due Process; 3) Managing the Work and Coping; and 4) Collegial Support and Professional Development. This document was provided to each

participant as a separate and secure electronically shared tool. The life grid approach supported researcher and participant collaboration (Rowland et al., 2019), while providing a structure for each participant to log specific experiences they considered important or relevant to their work during the 2020 – 2021 school year.

The interview process was strengthened by using the shared life grid document as an agenda for each of the three open-ended interviews conducted during the school year. This collaborative open-ended narrative inquiry approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) emphasized the importance of each individual's experiences. Interviews were conducted and recorded in the fall, winter and the spring using Zoom virtual technology. The screen sharing mode was used during the virtual interview to visually provide the life grid monthly log for both the interviewer and interviewee discussion. Word for word transcripts of the interviews and the life grid documentation was used as data in this phase of the study.

Data Analysis

This study was designed to examine data at the onset of the COVID-19 health pandemic (spring 2020) and throughout the 2020-2021 school year. The analysis of the data can lend a deeper understanding of how SpEdTs navigated and endured in their work during health pandemic conditions. These findings are important because special education continues to be a high need teaching area. In the next section, I present the methods for data analysis.

Phase One Surveys

The survey responses were analyzed using a statistical software platform (IBM SPSS Statistics) to condense data and identify participant (N=198) self-rated responses by valid percentages. Survey data includes how SpEdTs provided instruction, interacted with students and

parents, and completed due process work such as Individualized Education Plans. Data also included what SpEdTs considered as helpful resources.

Most participants (N=186) also self-volunteered to respond to items on coping by completing the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997). The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) is a validated 28-item research-based assessment measuring 14 differentiated coping reactions (e.g., active coping, planning, positive refraining, self-distraction, denial). Participant responses were analyzed to identify the most frequent coping styles and least used coping styles used by SpEdTs during spring 2020 distance learning.

Phase Two Cases

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), qualitative data can provide depth or meaning to the data gathered via quantitative approaches. The interview data in Phase Two of the study fulfilled this outcome by providing voice to the survey data collected in Phase One. The semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018) were conducted after the close of the 2019-2020 school year. By conducting the interviews, this researcher aimed to understand the participants' experience as a special educator when required to shift from a conventional face-to-face teaching format to distance learning.

Interview audio recordings were transcribed and verified for accuracy by participants before coding. To initiate the analysis and to align with a comparison-focused sampling approach (Patton, 2015), Participants were grouped into three cases: (1) elementary level (kindergarten – fifth grade); (2) secondary level (middle school and high school); and (3) intermixed (mixed group of early childhood, transition, and SpEdTs working with students' birth through age 21). These three groups were identified to distribute participant data in an even fashion and to align

with a multiple case study analysis (Yin, 2018). The multiple case design promoted analysis within a specific case and comparisons across age/grade level cases.

Using a deductive coding approach (Miles et al., 2014) four overarching categories were identified for coding the interview transcripts. These four areas aligned with the initial conceptual framework used in the review of the literature. Two researchers worked together on two interviews within the first case (elementary level) and established initial codes using the four categories of the conceptual framework. Next, the primary investigator took the lead on coding the remaining transcripts within the first case (elementary level). The second researcher was consulted to discuss coding additions and as a critical friend reviewer (Patton, 2015). The primary investigator completed the analysis of the first case (elementary level) and the remaining transcripts within the two additional cases (secondary and intermixed) by using a constant comparison approach to analyze the refine the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bazeley, 2013). To complete the final analysis and identification of themes, a comparison focused approach (Patton, 2015) was used to compare cases across age/grade levels and other relevant demographic variables.

Phase Three Cases

I used a case study approach (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018) to further investigate the special educator's experience of teaching during a health pandemic throughout the following school year. This phase of the study was designed to answer the overarching research question: How do Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services? By continuing data collection throughout the following school year, this researcher aimed to also answer the fourth research sub question: In what ways, if any, has the work and instructional practice of SpEdTs

changed due to COVID-19 experiences? How did SpEdTs readjust their work and instructional practice (including use of instructional and digital technology) in the school setting post-pandemic (or continued pandemic) conditions?

According to Crotty (1998), a phenomenological method attends to collecting and analyzing data by avoiding previous preconceptions. To avoid such preconceptions, participants completed monthly logging of their own significant experiences on the shared life grid form. This documentation acted as an agenda for interview discussion and as an additional form of data.

The verbatim transcripts were verified for accuracy by participants and served as the central data in my analysis (Yin, 2018). In addition, the life grid documentation for each case was analyzed in companion to the transcript encoding, repeating the cycle of analysis to support more thorough interpretations of the data (Yin, 2018). The summer 2020 interview transcript was also reviewed. Individual cases were written to summarize the experiences of COVID-19 from the onset (spring 2020) through the following school year (2020 – 2021). Multiple frameworks for identifying prevalent themes across cases and the temporal points of data collection were analyzed to reach conclusions (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). To finalize the analysis and verify the information, participants reviewed their case study and the findings. This review by inquiry participants (Patton, 2015) was used to confirm and validate the findings. In the final stages of analysis, multiple theoretical or conceptual perspectives (Patton, 2015) were used to re-examine the overall findings across each of the research phases to provide a synthesis of analysis across the entirety of the study.

Researcher Experience and Bias

As a special education teacher and educator for over 30 years, I have navigated various trends and educational mandates. As I moved from one initiative to the next, I learned to be flexible in my teaching and open to new learning. My experience over the years has prepared me to teach competently and to recognize skilled teachers. Skilled teachers are school leaders who model effective interaction skills, relevant instructional approaches, and resiliency to manage the demands and timelines presented throughout the school year.

The development of the COVID-19 pandemic created a shift in our schools as never experienced before. As a university instructor and supervisor of student teachers, concerns, worries and anecdotes from SpEdTs inundated my Zoom meeting space and email inbox. Through informal observation, I began to recognize the resiliency of skilled teachers as they quickly reformatted their instruction to online teaching. I also noticed the lack of resiliency for some teachers previously struggling or new to the field. They appeared to experience greater difficulty in adapting to the necessary changes.

For the last fifteen years, I have worked as adjunct faculty at the University of St. Thomas and developed relationships with many teachers graduating from our teacher preparation program. I recognize a possible conflict of interest I may have with graduate SpEdTs. I will avoid any direct or indirect undue influence or coercion for their possible participation in the study.

For me, teaching is more than a career. It is a lifestyle shaping my identity. This study is important to me. I consider the preparation and retention of skilled special educators my most significant contribution to the field of special education.

Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research and Validity

Triangulating data requires the opportunity to compare and cross-check data sets by matching data across multiple sources (Patton, 2015). Triangulation was designed within phases of this study and across the entirety of the findings. Provided are the exemplars of triangulation in this comprehensive study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of special educators.

Triangulation of data from this study was possible given the data collected from the Phase One survey and the Phase Two interviews. Although Phase one collected quantitative data and Phase Two collected qualitative study, these two sets of data in combination provided a mixed method study and triangulation of data (Patton, 2015). Both phases of the study collected similar information and data including instructional technology, interaction with parents and students, legal special education duties, and coping styles.

A constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bazeley, 2013) for encoding and analysis was implemented in the Phase Two interview data. According to Stake (2006), triangulation is “an effort to assure that right information and interpretations have been obtained” (p. 35). By using a constant comparison method and the use of a second researcher to verify encoding and act as a critical friend (Patton, 2015), triangulation in the data analysis was supported.

In Phase three of the study, the participants themselves reviewed the case studies and findings. An initial review by inquiry participants was completed to confirm their case study description. In addition, the participants were asked to read the finding overall including all four case studies and the prevalent themes identified from the findings. This approach to analytical triangulation was used to support accuracy and fairness in the findings (Patton, 2015).

Lastly, triangulation was enhanced by summarizing the findings of this comprehensive study. A final analysis of the findings over research phases was conducted using multiple theoretical or conceptual perspectives (Patton, 2015). This final analysis acts to synthesize findings across the entirety of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The survey was distributed to general listserv addresses and completed anonymously. Participants were invited to self-volunteer if interested in participating in the Phase Two interview. If participants did not want to place their name on the actual survey, they were directed to email me and communicate their interest. Participants for interviews in Phase Three will be recruited through a non-coercive discussion using a structured follow up screening approach.

Survey data was stored in the password protected Qualtrics platform. Data gathering and analysis, including interview transcripts and life grid documentation was stored in my password protected OneDrive account. Participant name or other identifying information is removed from the interview transcripts and will not be included in research publications.

Participant consent forms were included in survey dissemination and prior to interviews. Participants are informed of the possible risks in participating in the study including:

- (1) Possible emotional distress and/or recalling traumatic or distressing events - Given the stressors on personal, family, or employment changes due to COVID-19, participants could experience possible emotional distress and are to recall traumatic or distressing events.
- (2) Probing for personal or sensitive information - To gather information on how special education teachers adapted to changes in their role and coped with those changes,

participants will be asked to reflect on personal and job related information and resources in both the survey and the interview.

Given the sensitive nature of questions on the survey or interview on coping, participants could opt out of answering the Brief COPE questions or questions in the interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: ACCEPTING UNCERTAINTY (PHASE ONE FINDINGS)

I examined the impact of the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) health pandemic on the work of Minnesota special education teachers (SpEdTs). This study began spring 2020 as teachers shifted their work from typical face to face instruction in their schools to a state mandated period of distance learning. My study attended to the primary question: How do Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services? Given the complexity in answering this question, I identified additional sub-questions to isolate more specific information: How did SpEdTs provide specialized instruction and monitor student learning during COVID-19 distance learning and which students (e.g., age, severity of disability, geographic location) accessed distance learning? How did SpEdTs establish relationships, communicate with, and collaborate with parents regarding their children's IEP and provision of specialized instruction during COVID-19 distance learning? How did SpEdTs cope with, manage, and adapt to the responsibilities during COVID-19 distance learning? What resources proved helpful in adapting to the change(s)? In what ways, if any, has the work and instructional practice of SpEdTs changed due to COVID-19 experiences? How did SpEdTs readjust their work and instructional practice (including use of instructional and digital technology) in the school setting post-pandemic (or continued pandemic) conditions?

In this chapter, I present the findings of a survey disseminated to Minnesota SpEdTs conducted spring 2020. Survey data attended to the work of SpEdTs during the governor mandated stay home order due to the onset of COVID-19. I describe the findings related to two main themes: (1) how SpEdTs completed their work through distance learning and (2) how SpEdTs coped with the changes to their work during distance learning.

Special Educators Distance Learning Work

Special educators provided instruction in a variety of formats while in distance learning. Instructional formats included synchronous platforms where SpEdTs could meet with their students individually or in groups using virtual technology platforms. Asynchronous instruction was also implemented by prerecording video lessons or integrating interactive activities that students completed and shared with their teachers using the instructional technology provided. SpEdTs also disseminated instruction materials using email or disseminating hard copies of materials or instructional packets. Participants were asked to identify all of the approaches they used while in mandated distance learning, therefore a cumulative percentage is not provided in the following results.

Meeting with students individually using synchronous digital platforms (e.g., Zoom or Google Meet) was used by most of the participants (78%). Providing instructional materials via email (53%) or delivered to a students' home were instructional approaches used by slightly more than half of the participants (59%). Instructional methods used by less than half of the participating SpEdTs included synchronous group instruction (45%), asynchronous individual instruction (45%), asynchronous group instruction (39%), providing printed instructional materials for parents to pick up at the school (35%). See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Distance Learning Formats Used by Special Education Teachers

Type of Format: Instructional	Valid Percentage
Synchronous individual	78%
Synchronous group	45%
Asynchronous – individual	45%
Asynchronous – group	39%
Instructional materials sent via email	53%
Printed materials picked up	35%
Printed materials delivered	59%

Given the educational needs of students in special education programming, SpEdTs needed to interact and communicate with both their students and the parents or guardians of their students. Online platforms (88%) used for instruction were the most commonly used. Email (87%) communication was also readily used. This data suggests that teachers did not limit their use of technology for only instructional purposes. There was also a prevalent use of the phone to interact with parents and their students. Phone use included traditional phone interaction (81%) and the use of texting by over half of the participants (69%). The U.S. mail was used the least (38%). See Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Methods of Interaction with Students and Parents/Guardians

Type of Format: Interaction/Communication	Valid Percentage
Online platform	88%
Email	87%
Phone	81%
Text	69%
U.S. Mail	38%
Other	16.70%

During the spring 2020 governor issued stay home orders, special education teams still needed to complete necessary paperwork or due process work to adhere to the legal requirements of special education programming. Completing the special education legal processes and documentation is typically the responsibility of SETs. Special educators attend to legal timelines in order to provide special education programming through a collaboratively developed document, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). While in distance learning, participants primarily used virtual or online platforms (93%) to complete IEP requirements with student special education team members. Special educators used email to share paperwork 70% of the time. Special educators corresponded using the phone (49%), U.S. mail (26%) and text (13%) to complete required IEP work. See Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Methods for Completing IEPs

Type of Format: IEPs	Valid Percentage
Online Platform	93%
Email Paperwork	70%
Phone	49%
Text	13%
U.S. Mail	26%
Other	5%

Due to the mandates of social distancing during COVID-19, teachers made changes in their work while isolated from their professional community. Yet SpEdTs continued to rely on the support of their immediate colleagues for resources. Over half of the participants identified immediate team/colleagues as the most helpful resource (54%), while less (19%) considered the school district or school helpful. Professional teaching organizations or media and social networking educational groups (e.g., Facebook) were regarded as helpful by far less participants (10% and 12%). See Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Helpful Resources

Type of Resource	Valid Percentage
Immediate team/colleagues	54%
School district/school	19%
Social networking education groups (e.g. Facebook)	12%
Professional teaching organizations or media	10%

In this section, I described the findings on what methods or formats SpEdTs used to engage in their distance learning work in spring 2020. The unprecedented changes in their work during COVID-19 may have placed SpEdTs at an increased risk of experiencing high stress levels. In the next section, I will present how Minnesota SpEdTs coped with the changes in their role and adjusted to pandemic conditions.

Coping with the Work During Distance Learning

This second category of findings emerged given participant responses on their coping reactions to the COVID-19 restrictions. Participants responded to 28 items on coping, indicating how they had been dealing with stress since distance learning went into effect. Each item presented something about a particular way of coping. Participants responded whether they had been doing what the prompt indicated, rather than if they thought the approach was an effective way to cope with the COVID-19 school changes. Participant responded to items using a four-point Likert scale, one as “I haven't been doing this at all” and four as “I've been doing this a lot”. Participant responses were analyzed within the 14 Brief Cope (1994) coping styles, using the relevant prompts for each of the coping styles. By combining participant ratings of three and four-points, percentages are presented for each of the 14 coping styles to present the prevalence of each style. See Table 4.5 on Coping Styles.

Overall, the majority of participants coped with stress within pandemic conditions reporting six different approaches. A coping style of acceptance (87%) was most prevalent, followed by active coping (66%), positive reframing of the situation (65%), planning (58%), using emotional support (58%), and religion (53%). Less than half of the respondents used alternative approaches to coping with stress. These coping styles included using instrumental support (42%) and humor (32%). Less than a third of the respondents used coping styles of

venting (27%), self-blame (17%), denial (8%), behavioral disengagement (6%), and substance abuse (4%).

Table 4.5

Coping Styles

Coping Style (Carver, 1997)	1	2	3	4	3 & 4 Combined
Acceptance					87%
Q20. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.	2.2% (4)	11.3% (21)	47.8% (89)	38.7% (72)	
Q24. I've been learning to live with it.	.5% (1)	11.8% (22)	62.9% (117)	24.7% (46)	
Active Coping					66%
Q2. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.	9.1% (17)	34.4% (64)	41.9% (78)	14.5% (27)	
Q7. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.	3.8% (7)	21.5% (40)	53.8% (100)	21% (39)	
Positive Reframing					65%
Q12. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.	4.3% (8)	32.3% (60)	48.4% (90)	15.1% (28)	
Q17. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.	2.7% (5)	30.1% (56)	47.3% (88)	19.9% (37)	
Self-Distraction					65%
Q1. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.	4.3% (8)	33.9% (63)	35.5% (66)	26.3% (49)	
Q19. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.	5.4% (10)	25.8% (48)	43.0% (80)	25.8% (48)	
Planning					58%
Q14. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.	5.4% (10)	30.1% (56)	47.3% (88)	17.2% (32)	
Q25. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.	10.8% (20)	37.6% (70)	39.2% (73)	12.4% (23)	
Using Emotional Support					56%
Q5. I've been getting emotional support from others.	4.8% (9)	34.9% (65)	44.1% (82)	16.1% (30)	
Q15. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.	8.6% (16)	39.8% (74)	37.6% (70)	14.0% (26)	
Religion					43%
Q22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.	25.3% (47)	32.3% (60)	23.1% (43)	19.4% (36)	
Q27. I've been praying or meditating.	24.7% (46)	31.2% (58)	26.3% (49)	17.7% (33)	
Using Instrumental Support					42%

Q10. I've been getting help and advice from other people.	19.4% (36)	34.4% (64)	33.3% (62)	12.9% (24)	
Q23. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.	14.0% (26)	48.9% (91)	27.4% (51)	9.7% (18)	
Humor					32%
Q18. I've been making jokes about it.	21.5% (40)	38.2% (71)	28.5% (53)	11.8% (22)	
Q28. I've been making fun of the situation.	37.6% (70)	39.2% (73)	17.2% (32)	5.9% (11)	
Venting					27%
Q9. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.	32.3% (60)	48.9% (91)	15.6% (29)	3.2% (6)	
Q21. I've been expressing my negative feelings.	14.5% (27)	50.0% (93)	30.1% (56)	5.4% (10)	
Self-Blame					17%
Q13. I've been criticizing myself.	30.1% (56)	42.5% (79)	18.3% (34)	9.1% (17)	
Q26. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.	84.9% (158)	9.1% (17)	4.3% (8)	1.6% (3)	
Denial					8%
Q3. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."	59.1% (110)	28.0% (52)	9.1% (17)	3.8% (7)	
Q8. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.	82.8% (154)	14.5% (27)	1.6% (3)	1.1% (2)	
Behavioral Disengagement					6%
Q6. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.	60.2% (112)	33.3% (62)	5.4% (10)	1.1% (2)	
Q16. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.	78.0% (145)	17.2% (32)	4.3% (8)	.5% (1)	
Substance Use					4%
Q4. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.	71.5% (133)	24.2% (34)	3.2% (6)	1.1% (2)	
Q11. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.	75.8% (141)	19.9% (37)	3.8% (7)	.5% (1)	

Note: 1 = I haven't been doing this at all; 2 = I've been doing this a little bit; 3 = I've been doing this a medium amount; 4 = I've been doing this a lot

Chapter Summary

This first phase of the study examined how SpEdTs conducted their instructional work, interactions, and communication with students and parents, including legal requirements. The most common online instructional approach used by SpEdTs participating in this study was individual synchronous instruction (78%). More than half of students (59%) also had instructional materials delivered to them. These findings indicate a need to consider alternative distance learning approaches to ensure student access to the instructional materials needed for intensive intervention. Teachers and students (and parents) were more apt to interact using digital resources such as an online platform (88%) or email (87%). Participants commonly used the phone for phone calls (81%) or texting (69%). Almost all of the participants (93%) conducted the required special education IEP team meetings using an online platform. These meetings are completed primarily by adult team members. The findings suggest online technology more accessible to the adults in a student team than the students themselves.

A little over half of the participants (54%) identified their immediate team/colleagues the most helpful resources when adapting to the work during distance learning. These findings align with other studies that identify collegial support as an important resource in the work of SETs (Jones et al., 2013; Singh & Billingsley, 1998). These findings also suggest a need to schedule time throughout the school day for teamwork and collaboration.

Lastly, most special educators coped with stress within pandemic conditions using a coping style of acceptance (87%). Overall, over half of the special educators participating in the coping portion of the survey used positive methods, such as active coping (66%), positive reframing of the situation (65%), planning (58%) and using emotional support (58%). These

findings suggest that when placing SpEdTs within the worst conditions of a pandemic, SpEdTs rely on positive approaches to cope with their work.

In this chapter, I presented the quantitative findings on how SpEdTs conducted their work while adapting to the changes required for distance learning. I also presented how SpEdTs coped with their work during unprecedented conditions. In the next chapter, I present findings from Minnesota SpEdTs as they reflected on their spring 2020 work immediately after the conclusion of the school year using a qualitative research approach.

CHAPTER FIVE: WE'RE DOING THE BEST WE CAN (PHASE TWO FINDINGS)

In spring 2020, special educators navigated their work within the boundaries of the governor issued stay home order and directive to provide specialized services through distance learning. My study aimed to examine the experiences of Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) given the primary question: How do SpEdTs describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services? In addition to the initial survey disseminated in the spring, my mixed method study went deeper into this inquiry by collecting qualitative information from SpEdTs. I interviewed Minnesota SpEdTs (N=18) on their delivery of specialized instruction and obligation to the legal special education requirements. I also explored how SpEdTs readjusted and coped with the work in this unprecedented time for teachers, students and their families.

In this chapter, I describe the findings from the interviews. First, I introduce the participants of this multiple case research. Then, I describe the findings across three themes: (1) Designing Specialized Instruction; (2) Managing Specialized Programs; and (3) Adjusting to Change. Sub-Themes within each over-arching theme are outlined and described throughout the chapter.

Multiple Case Study

Given the variety of participants across age and grade levels, I organized the SpEdTs into three cases to analyze the findings. The demographic information collected on each participant includes participant gender, location of school or teaching responsibilities, general race demographics of the students in the school or district, grade or age level of students and the severity of disability. The demographic information was self-reported by the participants and presented in this section using a multiple case design framework.

Elementary Case

Seven participants were included in the elementary level case. Participant demographics ranged in school or district location, school race demographics and student severity of disability. Overall, there was a variety demographic information, except for the attribute of gender. See Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Elementary Case Participant Demographics

Participants	Gender	School/District Location	School Race Demographics	Severity of Disability
Jennifer	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Mild to Moderate
Jordan	Female	Suburb	Less than 50% White	Moderate to Severe
Deno	Male	Suburb	Less than 50% White	Moderate to Severe
Monica	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Mild to Moderate
Olivia	Female	Town	Over 50% White	Mild to Moderate
Emma	Female	Urban	Less than 50% White	Mild to Moderate
Sophia	Female	Urban	Over 50% White	Moderate to Severe

Secondary Case

Six participants were included in the secondary level case. Only two school or district locations were provided in the secondary case (suburb and rural), and the school race demographics were primarily similar. Secondary participants teaching levels were a mixture of middle school and high school. One participant taught both middle school and high school and one participant taught at a high school in an Alternative Learning Center (ALC). Overall, participants taught across a large range of student disabilities levels from mild to severe and profound disabilities. Gender was limited to only female participants. See Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

Secondary Case Participant Demographics

Participants	Gender	School/District Location	School Race Demographics	Level	Severity of Disability
Lizzy	Female	Suburb	Over 50% White	Highschool	Moderate to Severe/Profound
Mary	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Highschool/ ALC	Mild to Moderate
Christine	Female	Suburb	Less than 50% White	Middle School	Moderate to Severe
Emery	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Middle School /Highschool	Mild to Severe
Charlette	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Highschool	Mild to Moderate
Ruby	Female	Rural	Over 50% White	Highschool	Mild to Moderate

Intermixed Case

Five participants were included in the intermixed level case. The participants in this case demonstrate the variety of teaching responsibilities in the field who do not solely work with kindergarten through high school age students. Some special education teaching licenses cover special education services for individuals from birth to age 21. Two of the participants worked with individuals within that vast range (birth to age 21). One participant taught in a transition level program (ages 18 – 21) located at a prison. Two participants were early childhood educators. One participant serviced infants and children up to age three (and their families). One participant taught children three to five years of age.

One school or district location was classified as other, given the variety of districts this teacher worked in. The location of the prison was identified as unknown to secure identifiable information. Overall, participants taught across a large range of student disabilities levels from mild to severe and profound disabilities. Gender was limited to only female participants. See Table 5.3.

Table 5.3

Intermixed Case Participant Demographics

Participants	Gender	School/District Location	School Race Demographics	Level	Severity of Disability
Zoey	Female	Other	Over 50% White	Birth to Age 21	Moderate to Severe/Profound
Harper	Female	Unknown	Unknown	Transition/Prison	Mild to Moderate
Janie	Female	Urban	Less than 50% White	Early Childhood Birth to Age 3	Moderate to Severe
Zora	Female	Suburb	Over 50% White	Birth to Age 21	Moderate to Severe/Profound
Mia	Female	Suburb	Less than 50% White	Early Childhood Birth to Age 3	Moderate to Severe

Multiple Case Study Findings

In the following section, I present the findings of 18 interviews with Minnesota special educators immediately after Spring 2020 distance learning. I organized the findings from this multi-case study across three themes: (1) Providing Specialized Instruction; (2) Managing Specialized Programs; and (3) Adjusting to Change. Within each of the categories I present the overall findings across the participants highlighting relevant Sub-Themes. See Table 5.4 for a summary of themes and sub-themes.

Table 5.4

Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes and Sub-Themes	Summary	Voice of the Participants
1. Providing Specialized Instruction	Special educators considered a variety of elements to develop and deliver specialized instruction for students while in distance learning.	<i>I wasn't able to do every single thing the same, you know, how we did it in the classroom. But that way I prioritize which format I really need to focus on in terms of adapting the curriculum.</i> Jordan
1.1 Instructional Technology and Access	Special educators used synchronous and asynchronous online instruction during distance learning. However, access was interrupted or denied due to resources or characteristics of a disability.	<i>I had a couple of students who weren't able to access the computer, not because of not having access to a device, but just because of their disability.</i> Monica
1.2 Paper Packets and Materials	In addition to online instruction, special educators needed to provide instructional packets and materials to students to ensure all students had appropriate educational materials during distance learning.	<i>We had to determine how to kids or those learners that don't have the means. So, we had to set up this whole system of physical work for them.</i> Deno
1.3 Differentiated Instruction	Special educators differentiated distance learning instruction to support student access.	<i>You can make it a multiple-choice question. You can have them draw on this slide. You can have them...here are like five different options of how what they can do the work.</i> Emery
2. Managing Specialized Programs	Special educators continued to manage some legal requirements and processes to provide special education programming during distance learning.	<i>We were able to complete IEP meetings not evaluations. Those kinds of things were generally either Zoom or phone conferences.</i> Mary
2.1 Legal Requirements	Special educators conducted legal due process work differently during distance learning.	<i>Our IEP process is on SPED forms. We provided a distance learning IEP. And on the service minutes, a lot of the</i>

		<p><i>students were dropped just like 10 to 15 minutes daily. And we added kind of contact, and that contact can either be Zoom to Zoom, a Google classroom, email, or contacting the parents.</i></p> <p>Olivia</p>
2.2 Dependency on Others	Special educators relied on the relationships of parents and school team members to provide special education programming during distance learning.	<p><i>You know, like for distance learning, there's no way I would have been able to get all the modifications ready for my students. I counted thirty-six classes that my students are involved in. There's no way I could have done all that accommodations without the para staff.</i></p> <p>Emery</p>
3. Adjusting to Change	The work and responsibilities changed for special educators during distance learning.	<p><i>Everyone was really responsive and probably to the point that we weren't separating our work life and personal life as we maybe should have.</i></p> <p>Jordan</p>
3.1 Disequilibrium and Work-Home Imbalance	Special educators experienced disequilibrium in how they reacted to their work responsibilities during distance learning.	<p><i>I have some parents in that first month that they work during the day and their kids are at daycare. But I still wanted to be able to provide services. So, I provided services at six o'clock at night and seven o'clock at night.</i></p> <p>Jennifer</p>
3.2 Coping Responses	Special educators responded to the work during distance learning relying on a variety of coping responses.	<p><i>Like "two o'clock, two o'clock I have to listen to the governor's message!" So just trying to figure all that out. The anxiety medication helped. I'm a total like Type A, like I love planning out. And it was just like, oh, I can't plan out. This is a little overwhelming to not be able</i></p>

		<i>to plan anything really.</i> Sophia
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Providing Specialized Instruction

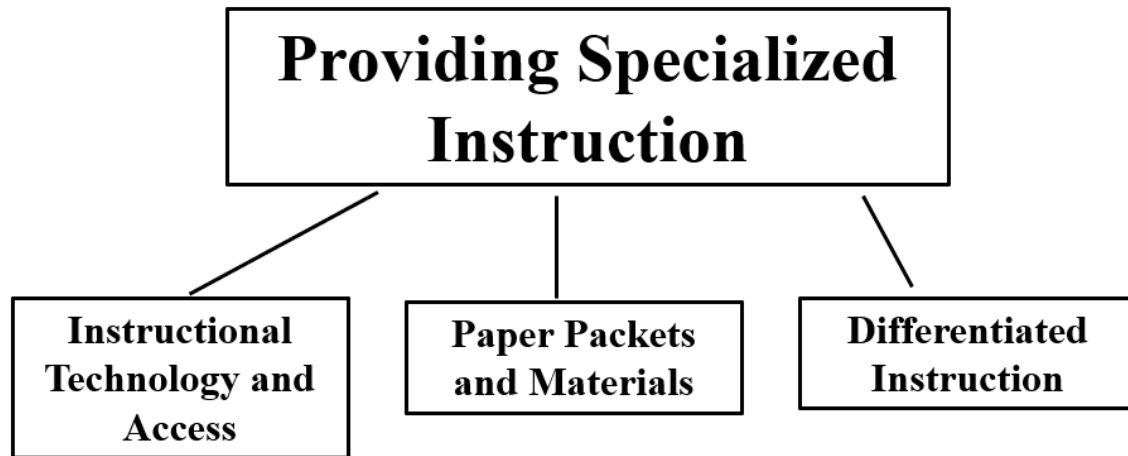
All of the participants shared information on the approaches used for specialized instruction during spring 2020 distance learning. Participant 3 described the initial confusion in designing specialized instruction at the onset of the stay at home order in this way:

What was distance learning? We didn't know what distance learning was. And then it went from paper packets to the district deciding which online platforms to use. And then from there, how to get that to our students. So, it was a long series of steps, which there was a lot of confusion, a lot of it.

A variety of distance learning approaches were shared across participants including the dissemination of paper packets and the use of digital tools and instructional technology. The findings in the category of specialized instruction are described in the Sub-Themes of instructional technology and access, paper packets and materials, and differentiated instruction. See Figure 5.1. In this section I present the findings.

Figure 5.1

Theme: Providing Specialized Instruction and Sub-Themes



Instructional Technology and Access

All of the participants except one used technology in some form to provide instruction during distance learning. The exception to this finding was the transition level teacher, located at a prison. Participants shared both synchronous and asynchronous methods for providing instruction. The devices disseminated to students, platforms and applications used by districts, schools and teachers varied. Table 5.5 provides an overview of the instructional practices uses during distance learning.

Table 5.5

Instructional Practices During Distance Learning

Devices	Schoolwide Platforms	Synchronous Platforms	Interactive Applications	Asynchronous Applications	Social Media
iPad (n=2)	Schoology (n=6)	Skype (n=1)	Seesaw (n=7)	YouTube Video (n=8)	TikTok (n=1)
Chromebook (n=4)	Google Classroom (n=5)	WebEx (n=1)	Pear Deck (n=1)	Class Dojo (n=1)	Google Hangout (n=2)
Laptops (n=1)		Zoom (n=10)	Reading A-Z (n=1)	Virtual Field Trip (n=1)	Google Messenger (n=1)
		Google Meets (n=3)	Boom Cards (n=1)	Bookshare (n=1)	FaceBook Messenger (n=1)
			Teach Your Monster to Read (n=1)	Co-Writer (n=1)	Whats Up (n=1)
				Google Form (n=3)	
				Oddyssey Ware (n=1)	
				GoGuardian (n=1)	

Eleven participants used schoolwide platforms of Schoology or Google Classroom. In addition, 15 of the participants used synchronous platforms for instruction including Skype, WebEx, Zoom and Google Meets. The instructional application Seesaw was the most prevalent interactive technology used and only by elementary and preschool level teachers. Only one form of assistive technology (Co-Writer) was reported. Two participants used nonconventional social media applications to interact with students to support instruction.

Asynchronous applications were commonly used for online instruction across a variety of participants. Eight participants across all three cases produced their own YouTube videos for instruction. Two teachers working with families of young children (ages three to five) or students with multiple disabilities in the intermixed case shared how they developed videos to support parents with teaching their child in the home. All other participants (Elementary: n=3, Secondary: n=5, Intermixed: n=2) developed instructional videos for their students.

Distance learning required a rapid shift to online instruction instead of the typical delivery of specialized instruction using current curriculum and materials. Participants shared information on the lack of resources for online instruction. At the elementary level, Deno stated:

Being in a district that's so disadvantaged socio economically really brought to light like which kids had the means, which learners had the means to obtain. A lot of them didn't have cable and then Comcast only gave us a few hot spots, so I think we had a need for just our school for like 30 hot spots and we only qualified for, I think it was like 12 hot spots.

Ten participants (Elementary: n=5, Secondary: n=4, Intermixed: n=1) shared their concern for families that did not have internet services. This concern was shared by participants working with school age children and younger. Janie (birth to age three) stated, "Probably the

biggest challenges are technology for families because often it might just be a phone that they're on.”

However, participants also shared how their school or district worked to overcome a lack of resources for students. Five of the participants stated that they distributed iPads, Chromebooks or laptops to all of their students to ensure that students had the devices needed for online instruction. Five participants also commented that their schools had a head start due to already initiated e-learning for their students. Olivia stated, “Because we are a STEM school most of the students, even kindergartners have had some experience with technology.”

Although schools worked to provide the necessary resources for online instruction, eleven participants (Elementary: n=6, Secondary: n=2, Intermixed: n=3) shared a lack of access for their students due to the underlying characteristics of their learner’s disability. Monica described the inability for her students identified with autism to access synchronous or virtual instruction. She shared the following, “Just looking at faces was too hard for them. Just the sensory pieces of it was too hard for them, probably emotionally too.” Sensory differences were also shared by teachers who taught students with visual or hearing disabilities. Zora provided specialized services for students identified blind or with a visual impairment. She stated, “It just was too hard. He couldn't do it. And for him, I tried to come up with ideas for what we call visual efficiency and kind of sensory integration”. Two participants at the secondary level shared that even though a family had internet services, the parents were not comfortable with their student’s using devices due to safety issues. For example, one parent placed a device out of reach due to behavioral issues. Participants teaching young children or students with more with more significant disabilities also questioned the effectiveness of instructional technology. Lizzy stated,

“This modality is not good. This is not a good model for delivering services to this level of student. It just isn't.”

Regardless of the difficulty in ensuring student access to online instruction, participants across each case expressed new learning and aspirations to take technology forward into their teaching. Six participants reported on new skills and knowledge in online instruction and technology. Emma stated:

My biggest takeaway is that I need to teach students how to access the assistive technology that's already right on their iPad and how to get them access to the accommodations and assistive technology that they have added to their iPad to make these resources easier to access.

Two participants spoke to the use of online technology to ensure instruction continues on traditional school release days like Minnesota snow days. Emery stated:

Our district is hoping that if we continue with Google classroom, we wouldn't necessarily be considered having snow days. They're e-learning days. So, you would have all the information you need for that for that week or that day that they could access that, if they have their technology at home.

Two other participants shared areas of differentiation they will continue for their students into the school year. One participant shared her new tools for progress monitoring and assessing student performance using instructional technology and applications.

Paper Packets and Materials

Fourteen participants across all three cases (Elementary: n=6, Secondary: n=5, Intermixed: n=3) distributed packets and materials as an alternative approach to compensate for student lack of online access. Six of the participants shared the use of instructional packets and

materials in the initial weeks of the stay home order while students and families waited to be set up with devices (Chromebooks or iPads). Emma stated:

At the very beginning, I provided packets and work because I didn't know what it was going to look like. I provided some paper and pencils. I found out the parents were pretty happy that I did that as well.

Deno commented that it took up to eight weeks for all of the students and teachers to get connected to internet. Jordan shared additional barriers for families to use provided technology due to language differences.

Twelve of the participants (Elementary: n=5, Secondary: n=4, Intermixed: n=3) commented on the need to continue to distribute instructional packets because students did not have access to internet. Ruby stated:

Some of my students didn't have internet access, so our school district had set it up for bus drivers who were delivering meals every day. And so, one day on the bus, drivers would have paras who rode along with and would actually take schoolwork to the students.

Although instructional packets were disseminated, participants commented that they were unsure if work was completed. Emery commented that given the restrictions of a health pandemic and the possible spread of COVID-19, her district did not allow work to be returned by students. She relied on parents to return student work. She stated:

Fourteen kids on my caseload, and four of them had no technology. So, their parents scanned or took pictures of papers and then emailed them back to me, which was an awful process. Yeah, it was awful because a lot of the times the paper was so blurry, you couldn't read it.

Special educators across all levels shared their experiences in developing new technologies while trying to adapt older approaches for instruction for their learner. Although adjusting instruction or materials is not unique to the work of special educators, distance learning required new and different approaches to differentiating instruction. Next, the findings on how special educators adapted the variety of distance learning approaches to meet the educational needs of their learners is described.

Differentiated Instruction

In addition to securing online access, student engagement with the technologies was also necessary to provide instruction in a distance learning setting. Since online instruction was new to students and families, participants shared the need to provide initial instruction on how to access and use the technologies. Participants across cases (Elementary: n=4, Secondary: n=3, Intermixed: n=1) designed tutorials and virtual help sessions for both students and parents on how to use the instructional technology. Christine stated:

So, there were a lot of videos. We said, like we emailed videos of how to log into Schoology or just like a lot of, what do you call them? A lot of social story videos. Like, I don't know what to do today. It's the first day back at school. Mm hmm? My teacher says I should log into Schoology. Here is the link. I should click here, and just kind of walking through what they needed, how they should get there.

Participants (Elementary: n=7, Secondary: n=5, Intermixed: n=4) described a variety of considerations for designing, adapting and delivering differentiated instruction to their learners during distance learning. Instruction was differentiated to support student learning differences or characteristics of a specific disability. For example, instruction needed to be adapted for students developing language and communication skills. Mia shared:

When I tried to do the synchronous Zoom sessions. You know, some of the kids aren't engaging or I'm asking a question and realizing they're not able to get the response that I want because I'm framing it the wrong way. So, some students can only answer yes or no questions. Where I was asking them to tell me the color or expecting them to use the vocabulary that I knew they didn't have just at the moment. So, having to make that switch. So, I'm addressing individual children throughout those sessions, having to stop and be like, nope, the student needs to be asked the question this way if I want a response from them.

In distance learning as in the conventional face to face format, teachers were reminded of the importance of differentiation to meet the varying needs of their learners. Participants used student YouTube videos, integrated a weekly bingo game with prizes, used check in – check out systems, student self-evaluation, video modeling, visual checklists, graphic organizers, individual recorded videos, adaptations to asynchronous applications allowing for student drawing or audio response, and audio assisted directions and videos. They adapted curriculum to meet the needs of parents and their students. Monica stated:

We would train parents as to know, these are some things that you can expect from your students. And then if that isn't working, try this. And if that isn't working, try this. And if that isn't working, try this. And then if that's not working, it's not worth it at this juncture. It was a lot of that.

Some participants described favorable outcomes for their students. Participant 1 commented that because of distance learning and the ability for a student to go at his own pace, he was actually making better progress than in school. Christine also shared the unexpected

response of a student identified with a moderate to severe cognitive disability who differentiated and adjusted his own online instruction.

Christine stated:

He read the Cliff's Notes instead of watching the video. He found the Cliff's Notes for each chapter and read the Cliff's Notes. And we watched him do it (using GoGuardian) because the video was so choppy and he couldn't watch the video. You are so smart.

Eleven participants (Elementary: n=4, Secondary: n=5, Intermixed: n=2) shared approaches adapting student assessment while in distance learning. Approaches included reviewing assignments or work samples of student dictated responses, answers provided through drawing or circling the correct answer when given multiple choice options, data reported directly from digital technologies (e.g., Google Classroom, Vizzle, Reading A-Z), photos of work sent by parents or emailed by students back to their teachers. Jordan shared her options for student response using the Seesaw application. She stated, "The kids get draw in there, they can record themselves speaking, which for us is huge considering we're not all writing perfectly yet." One participant recorded synchronous sessions and then went back to view instructional sessions to collect necessary assessment data. This same participant also used the video chat feature using a smartphone to assess a student's reading skills for a student who did not have internet capability at his home.

Two secondary participants commented on the school amended grading policy to a pass or fail system. This grading policy appeared unique to the secondary case. Emery stated:

The one thing that I was not excited about is grading for seventh and eighth grade.

Everybody got a pass. No matter what their percent was. They got a pass in their class.

And a lot of teachers were upset about that. They're like, you know, every kid that's got

like a 10 percent because he's done nothing. But he gets a pass like the same kid that worked to get an 80 or 90. And then nine through 12, they could take a pass/fail or they could take a letter grade. So, the frustration was all of this work we did to go through for paper copies and getting everything modified is like, well, they're going to get a pass anyway.

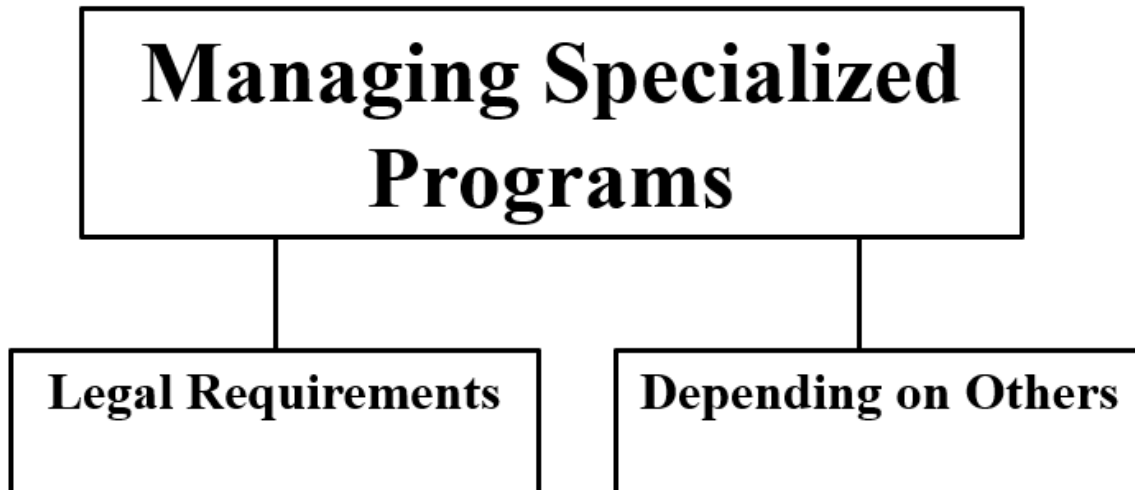
In this section I described how participants provided specialized instruction in distance learning. Their experiences were group into sub-themes of instructional technology and access, paper packets and materials, and differentiated instruction. Specialized instruction is guided by the legally bound instructional priorities and services for each student. In the next section, I describe how participants attended to their responsibilities in managing the work of specialized programming.

Managing Specialized Programs

Special educators are accountable for multiple requirements including, processes, paperwork and timelines. Special educators also work and collaborate with various team members to develop, implement, review and revise specialized plans based on student performance and functioning. This section describes how participants attended to managing these legal special education programming requirements during spring 2020 distance learning. To explain the findings, I organized the information into sub-themes of legal requirements and depending on others. See Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2

Theme: Managing Specialized Programs and Sub-Themes



Legal Requirements

Student individual plans or Individual Education Programs (IEPs) were written assuming service provision in a face to face setting. During the COVID-19 health pandemic in spring 2020, no instruction was permitted in school buildings. Given the unprecedented times, there was confusion in the specification of the required legal paperwork in distance learning setting. Emma stated:

We kept having, as we learned new or new things from the from, you know, the Minnesota Department of Education, that we kept having to revise the addendums, because they wanted something else, and then they wanted something else. And it was, just, the addendums were frankly nightmares to do. I did them three different times.

Thirteen of the eighteen participants reported a revised IEP called an Individualized Distance Learning Plan (IDLDP). The IDLP was provided to the parent or guardian along with a legal document called a Prior Written Notice. This form is disseminated to the parent or guardian to request permission before initiating a proposed change to a student's special education program.

Eventually many districts required the IDLP for each student currently receiving special education services. Monica stated:

When you're told you've got to redo all of your IEPs and then, oh, no, it's not going to be redoing your IEPs. Now we've got this new form (IDLDP) out there. So, here's the new form and then that's got to be done.

The requirements to make the necessary adjustments to student IEPs were different from district to district. One participant completed an addendum to adapt the language in the current IEP to account for distance learning. Three participants only sent out a Prior Written Notice form. One participant was issued a form from the special education director to complete and

attach to the current IEP. Overall, participants did not schedule formal IEP meetings to make the changes to the current IEPs, they simply discussed changes with families over the phone and sent paperwork electronically using email or by U.S. mail.

Annual IEP meetings are another required due process requirement managed by special educators. Annual IEPs are completed by a one-year anniversary date. Student specific IEP teams meet to review, revise and develop a new annual IEP based on the current performance of the learner. Deno stated:

I had an IEP meeting the day he (the governor) closed the school. So, no one knew what to do. And then the governor said, we'll get back to you. And so, the final decision, was to do your IEPs as best you can through technology.

Twelve of the participants (Elementary: n=6, Secondary: n=3, Intermixed: n=3) needed to complete annual IEP meetings for their students in spring 2020. Meetings were conducted virtually using Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet and over the phone. Legal documents were sent primarily through email. Four participants reported more ease in conducting IEP meetings during distance learning using a virtual platform. Sophia stated:

It's actually easier when you don't have to plan for people being in a building. When you have related services coming in and out, it's actually easier just to say, OK, are you available at this time? And you can pick any day rather than just Wednesdays. So actually, scheduling a meeting became easier because everybody's home all the time.

However, participants did not find ease completing the special education comprehensive evaluation. The special education evaluation is required at the entry and exit of the program, as well as periodic timelines within special education programming. Thirteen participants (Elementary: n=7, Secondary: n=2, Intermixed: n=4) shared information on special education

evaluations during distance learning. There was some variation in their responses. Two of those participants did not have any evaluations or required testing due in the spring. Seven of the participants attempted to complete some of the evaluation components during distance learning by completing observations of the student in virtual class sessions and disseminating rating scales and surveys to team members to complete. Five participants needing to complete evaluations were directed to put all of the evaluations on hold until the fall. Only two participants completed evaluations. Both were at critical transition points of student programming (birth to age three referrals and exiting seniors).

Depending on Others

Besides the required meetings and legal paperwork, special educators invite ongoing communication with team members to implement specialized programming. Given the stay home orders and changes to how services would be provided, participants relied on their relationships with others to provide special education programming during distance learning. The importance of maintaining relationships with parents was reported by early childhood, elementary level, or participants working with students with more significant disabilities (Elementary: n=7, Secondary: n=1, Intermixed: n=4). Deno stated, “I called the interactions. I called it my silver lining. Because, interacting with the parents so much and the child, really showed me what education is supposed to be like.” Monica stated, “I actually had probably the most work with parents that I've ever had.” Zora stated, “The vast majority of my students were, it was, I would say it was more coaching with the parent than it was direct instruction with the student. But there was a lot of parent coaching.”

Participants also shared a dependency on the support of their parents to provide specialized services. Zoey stated:

The issue for many of my students wasn't like were they able to do it, but did they choose to do it? And so, you know that really kind of depended upon the family and the support the kid had at home.

The individual needs of a student also dictated the need for parent involvement. Sophia stated:

It was for sure really heavily parent involved. I mean, we have kids that motorically can't function on a laptop. Or just behaviorally, maybe have a minute of attention or not even. So, I knew it was going to be really parent heavy.

In any mutual relationship, reciprocity is needed. Participants (Elementary: n=7, Secondary: n=3, Intermixed: n=4) also shared how they supported their parents. Jennifer stated:

I wanted parents to know that I was here as a resource for them. So, I talked to parents almost every day. Well I talked to two parents every day because they were just struggling at home with their kiddo with anxiety.

Sophia shared her routine interactions with a parent of student working from instructional packets, "Every other day, I checked in with them through the phone. I was able to talk to them about what they've been doing, if they have any questions. Kind of more of a family connection piece."

To maintain communication with parents, participants interacted with parents using phone, text, and email. They also met up with parents at virtual instructional sessions or posting messages on instructional asynchronous applications like Seesaw. Three participants reported interacting with parents daily (Elementary: n=2, Secondary: n=1), while nine participants (Elementary: n=6, Secondary: n=1, Intermixed: n=2) reported communicating with parents at least weekly.

Monica stated:

We opened up our phones to parents. That was something we just didn't do before. I didn't give out my phone number. Parents had my phone number so we could text and go back and forth. And we kind of laid out expectations. And I don't want to say rules, but how would you access our texts and numbers responsibly and things like that.

However, reaching out directly to students instead of parents was primarily unique to secondary level teachers (Secondary: n=5, Intermixed: n=2). Emma stated:

One time I did call the parent. It was the first time I was going to Zoom with the student, but the student hadn't showed up on the Zoom meeting, you know. So, I called the parent to say, hey, could you ask your son to hop on the zoom? And she was like, you don't have to call me, call him. So, she gave me the students phone number, and after that, I'd call him directly.

In addition to interacting with parents or students, four participants reported relying on siblings or a caregiver to ensure special education programming.

During distance learning, participants also depended on the support of their colleagues and school team members to provide programming. Overall, eight participants (Elementary: n=5, Secondary: n=3) reported on the benefits of their paraprofessionals or educational assistants. According to Deno, "EA's. They were lifesavers". Participants expressed the benefits of working with other team members including, a co-teacher (n=1), a student teacher (n=1), related service personnel or general education teachers (n=8). Participants also referred to sharing the work with other school professionals such as cultural liaisons (n=1) and language interpreters (n=1). Monica stated:

Due to the workload, we finally got to this point of, no, we need to be working together.

And so in the working together, you know, one teacher would be doing this piece and one

teacher would be doing this piece and one teacher would be doing another piece, all to make the common theme of whatever they were doing come together. And so being able to help in their workload and being able to do all of that stuff led to just collaboration that hadn't happened before.

Overall, most participants (Elementary: n=8, Secondary: n=4, Intermixed: n=5) shared the benefit of collegial support throughout the duration of distance learning. Participants found opportunity for connecting with others through district provided common planning time and informal opportunities using shared documents, email, or text. Jordan stated, "One of the biggest things was just staying in contact with other people, like staff. It felt like we were really collaborative, and at times, just talking to others about what you were doing."

Two participants shared their hopes for working with team members in the future. Jennifer wanted to replicate the morning check in time with her paraprofessionals and stated the following:

I would start it off with my paras in the morning to do a morning check in, which is something I will definitely carry into the school year. I'm going to get my administrator to pay for it because it would be beneficial to do that morning check in. And I just can't say enough about it. It was great.

Thirteen participants (Elementary: n=5, Secondary: n=6, Intermixed: n=2) volunteered information on administrative support or leadership. Responses were varied across participants.

Ten of the participants provided a positive response for one of their administrative leaders.

Christine stated:

We just really kind of worked on just talking about who's logging in. I mean, we just talked about kind of the same. How can we help this kid? This kid looks really depressed

every time I see him. How can we help him? And just so we talked. Twice a week with that group. The principle always came. Which they never came before. That was kind of nice. They didn't always come for the whole meeting, but they always like popped in for five or ten minutes.

Yet four of the same participants provided a negative response when referring to an administrator in a different position. For example, Christine also shared, “I think regular ed got a different message than us. We kind of suddenly kind of turned into ESY (summer school). We need to maintain what the kids have so they're not going backwards.” Six participants echoed a similar message from administration on being okay with doing less when implementing specialized instruction in a distance learning setting. Monica stated:

Our special ed director just kept telling us, we're in crisis mode. You cannot expect to do everything that you need to do. So, you just do what you feel like you can do. And then she kept telling us you're doing too much. You're doing too much.

In this section, I presented findings on how participants strived to manage specialized programming, including legal requirements and a dependency on others to ensure special education services. I reported multiple changes in the work of special educators in spring 2020. Educators experienced these shifts in their work while also navigating an unprecedented health pandemic. Next, I report how participants attempted to adjust to the numerous changes in their work and lifestyle.

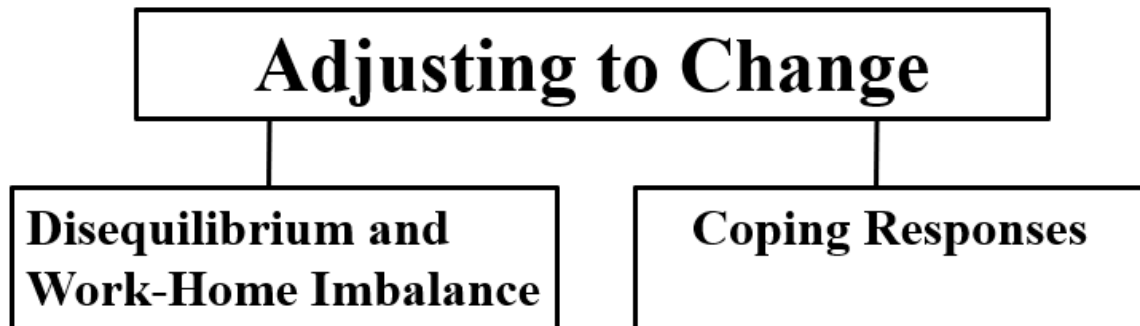
Adjusting to Change

In the previous two sections of this chapter, the themes aligned with two primary responsibilities in the work of a special educator. In this section, I present findings on how participants attempted to adjust and cope to the changes in work and lifestyle while mandated to

teach from their homes at the onset of a worldwide health pandemic. I organized my findings from this theme into the two sub-themes of disequilibrium and work-home imbalance, and coping responses. See Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3

Theme: Adjusting to Change and Sub-Themes



Lizzy expressed her difficulty in adjusting to the changes in her work this way, “So, what you're asking me to do when you're asking me to do this kind of teaching, is asking a fish to climb a tree. That's what it is.” In addition to Lizzy, others shared their difficulty in adjusting to a change based on the changes in work-home balance, amount of work, and the effort they put into their work.

Eight participants (Elementary: n=3, Secondary: n=1, Intermixed: n=4) shared their difficulties in managing a work-life balance. The difficulty in finding boundaries and balance in the work was influenced by different schedules and communication with colleagues and parents. Jennifer spoke of the necessity to develop her own boundary lines to end the workday in order to cope with the excessive amount of work. Zora also shared the excessive amount of work stating, “there are only so many hours in the day”.

Participants reported excessive work hours in the first weeks of distance learning. For Monica, her distance learning work began in place of the typical spring break. Others reported the excessive number of tasks to complete in the initial weeks. Jennifer stated:

I was putting about forty-five to fifty hours with distance learning in the first like month.

It just was a lot, you know. And you're still having trainings from the district on how to use different things and having meetings and union meetings.

The excessive amount of time required to provide specialized instruction and other tasks was primarily unique to the elementary level participants. All of the elementary participants shared difficulties in managing a traditional work schedule given multitude of instructional sessions required for distance learning. Jennifer explained her schedule:

My first kiddo at 8:15 until 8:30 and then my second kiddo is 8:45. You know, little breaks here and there because it depends on parents' schedules. Nine o'clock I was

always on a morning meeting with some grade level teacher with my kiddos. I got to see what's going on in the classroom. And you're right back to every 15 minutes I had a student. I did have to physically blackout lunch because I was forgetting. And for the first like three weeks, we didn't have prep consistently because we were just really trying to figure out schedules and get the kids on.

Four elementary participants reported an overflow of the schedule into the evening or weekends because of the need to adhere to family schedules. Deno stated:

It was very consuming. And, I don't think you had time really to manage it. As far as like breaking it down, because if everyone was on such a different schedule, then you're trying to just work with each parent individually and their schedule, plus you're trying to get your platform loaded with academics, and then figure out what doesn't work, and what does work. So, it was it was very consuming.

Only three participants (Elementary: n=1, Secondary: n=2) reported appreciating more ease and flexibility in the schedule during distance. Ruby stated, "The Covid break was stressful, but it took away some stress in that my schedule became a lot more fluid. And so, like, for example, I could work around their schedule and I did." Four elementary participants found some ease in the distance learning schedule given a four day a week instructional schedule. Deno stated, "And I know it sounds like simple, like any prep time, but it's so much more. It's a lot deeper than that. Because you're just using that time to make sure you're servicing your students like they need."

Participants across cases also communicated an excessive amount of effort put forth to manage or cope with distance learning. The amount of effort was stated in different ways. While some participants expressed a tremendous amount of effort as "the best as they could" another participant mentioned that they weren't bothering to provide adequate effort because they

weren't expecting that level of effort by their students. Nine participants used some form of an expression in reference to doing "the best we can".

Regardless of the amount effort participants spent on their work, there was also feelings of not doing enough. Emma stated, "Mostly I feel like I struggled with feeling like I wasn't doing enough." This struggle in coping with the work was expressed by four participants as a sense of a loss of control. Deno stated, "I think the toughest thing that you have to manage is understanding your new limitations of things you can control and things you can't."

Emotion codes (Miles et al., 2014) were noted in responses by eleven of the participants. They used words such as frustrating, frightening, terrified, scared, worried, helpless, hate, afraid, nervous in their responses to coping with the changes in their work due to pandemic conditions. Their responses were provided when describing the service areas teachers were unable to provide to their students, the challenges of using online technology with some students, and their relationships with colleagues and parents. Olivia reframed her response in an attempt to stay positive stating "it was reassuring knowing I'm not the only one in the same boat".

Participants not only commented on reduced quality of life, four participants shared a need for increased anxiety medication or visits with a therapist. Participants shared a multitude of worries and concerns when faced with the demands of distance learning. Next, I present the approaches participants shared when coping with the responding to the changes in their work and lifestyle.

Coping Responses

Seventeen out of the eighteen participants shared responses on coping with the work as they shifted and attempted to adjust to a fully distance learning setting. I referred to the 14 differentiated coping reactions (e.g., active coping, planning, positive refraining, self-distraction,

denial) taken from The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) to analyze participant responses. I isolated participant responses when they shared how they coped with the changes in their work during distance learning. Participant responses were not the exact wording as outlined in the COPE Brief. This analysis is merely this researchers' interpretation. Participants may have provided more than one response associated with a coping style. The most prevalent coping style was *positive reframing*, whereas the least prevalent were *planning* and *religion*. See Table 5.6 for the coping responses identified.

Table 5.6

Coping Responses

Coping Style (Carver, 1997)	Prevalence of Coded Responses	Participants Coded
Positive Reframing	14	n=8
Self-Distraction	10	n=7
Acceptance	6	n=5
Using Emotional Support	7	n=3
Active Coping	3	n=3
Using Instrumental Support	2	n=2
Planning	1	n=1
Religion	1	n=1

Participants shared their genuine responses to their distance learning experiences. They truly demonstrated positive reframing and a sense of hope as they looked ahead to the upcoming school year. These findings demonstrate the resiliency and growth of these participants given the most difficult times in their teaching professions. Next, I conclude this chapter with a summary of the findings from this phase of my research.

Chapter Summary

In spring 2020, special educators persisted through areas of programming never experienced before. Governor issued stay home orders required the delivery of specialized services in a distance learning format. In this phase of my research, participants shared how they navigated this unsettled season of their profession with stories of their unique circumstances and desire to support their students. My study aimed to examine the experiences of Special Education Teachers (SpEdTs) given the primary question: How do SpEdTs describe the impact of the 2020 Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) pandemic on the way they provide special education services? In this chapter, I presented findings across study across three themes: (1) Providing Specialized Instruction; (2) Managing Specialized Programs; and (3) Adjusting to Change.

Special educators considered various elements to develop and deliver specialized instruction for students while in distance learning. They used synchronous and asynchronous online instruction during distance learning, often faced with difficulties due to student access to the instructional technology or barriers presented within aspects of a disability. Most online programs were inadequate to meet the unique learning needs of students, requiring SpEdTs to differentiated distance learning instruction to support student access and engagement. Lastly, to ensure the provision of instruction to all students, SpEdTs provided instructional packets and materials to students during distance learning.

Special educators continued to manage some legal requirements and processes to provide special education programming during distance learning. Many districts required a new IEP called a Distance Learning Plan. Districts put most comprehensive special education evaluations on hold due to the inability to conduct face-to-face testing. Special educators needed to conduct their legal due process differently by meeting with parents and other team members using virtual meeting spaces or correspondence through email. SpEdTs relied on the relationships of parents and school team members to provide special education programming during distance learning. Dependency on parents was especially apparent for young students or those with more significant disabilities.

The work responsibilities changed for special educators during distance learning as they needed to adjust to multiple changes in the work-life and lifestyle. They experienced disequilibrium in their role and imbalance in their workload as they attempted to readjust their work responsibilities during distance learning. At the onset of the pandemic, SpEdTs waited for directives on how to proceed with programming, and their guidance often changed or was confusing. Special educators responded to the work during distance learning using various coping responses as they attempted to readjust their role and their work responsibilities.

At the time of the interviews, the future was still unknown. Some participants reflected on spring 2020 with some sense of loss and with hope for a new beginning in the upcoming school year. It was the start of the summer and time for a well-deserved respite for these educators. However, their summer break was clouded by a haunting sense of reality as we continued to move through our communities masked and attending to social distancing. Deno stated it well, “Things will never ever go back to the way we were.”

The findings from this phase of my research verify significant changes in the work of special educators when faced with pandemic conditions. The changes these special educators confronted due to the stay home order and shift to distance learning impacted their instruction and responsibilities for providing specialized programming. Furthermore, these participants withstood these difficult challenges with a positive outlook and an enduring care for their school communities.

CHAPTER SIX: CRAWLING TO THE FINISH LINE (PHASE THREE FINDINGS)

Although this study began at the onset of the pandemic in Minnesota (spring 2020), the pandemic raged into the next school year. In this chapter, I share the experiences of four special education teachers (SpEdTs) as they continued to navigate pandemic conditions throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year. For each case, I introduce each participant and then present an overview of their experience teaching during the COVID-19 health pandemic. My goal for each of these cases is to describe the conditions they faced and how the pandemic impacted the work of each special educator. Later in the chapter, I present two prevailing themes across the cases to describe their experiences.

Cases

In writing the cases, I reviewed previous interviews conducted in the summer immediately after the onset of the health pandemic in spring 2020. The participants engaged in both Phase One and Phase Two of the study. Participants are referenced in chapter five when relevant. I also analyzed interview transcripts from the 2020 – 2021 school year (fall, winter, and spring) along with a monthly documentation log provided by each participant on activities they identified as important to their work. I used this collection of participant data to describe the full breadth of their experience as a special educator during the COVID-19 health pandemic.

Each of the participants teaches in a suburban district in Minnesota, although the demographics of their schools vary. These educators teach students identified with developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders or cognitive disabilities. Their students would be considered students with moderate to severe and severe to profound disabilities. Special education programming for these students includes various specialized services, and they spend most of their school day in the special education classroom. Each case

study describes how the health pandemic impacted the work of these educators as they strived to continue intensive specialized services for their students while navigating changes in COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines.

Case 1: Jordan

Jordan identifies as a White female who teaches in a mid-sized elementary school. About half of the students in her school are students of Color. Jordan reported that a little over half of the school population receives free and reduced lunch services. Formerly a school counselor, Jordan completed her fourth year of teaching as a special educator during the 2020 - 2021 school year. When faced with governor stay home orders in the onset of the health pandemic, Jordan quickly adapted the fully asynchronous online instruction she was providing to her students by teaching herself a new online platform and revising her instruction for her students in about a two-week period of time. Jordan made these changes recognizing the unique needs of her students. Using the Seesaw asynchronous program, she was able to provide instructional videos from her home resembling the classroom environment her students were accustomed to. Jordan individualized each of her lessons providing differentiated assignments for each of her students, allowing students to respond using audio, pictorial or written response. Jordan designed her lessons using a backward design approach, ensuring accountability to student IEPs through ongoing instruction and progress monitoring.

Jordan began the 2020 – 2021 school year trying to make sense of what she knew about the health pandemic and envision the implications on student programming for the upcoming school year. Jordan started the interview in October by stating, “my role keeps changing”. Although she was highly involved in the school wide planning team, she still was not certain of her role as an elementary special educator in October.

To begin the school year, Jordan's elementary school implemented a hybrid model for grades two through five. Students attended school a two-days a week. On the other school days, students attended online. One day was asynchronous, and the other two were mostly synchronous. The online instruction was provided by a second teacher who only provided online instruction. This hybrid model used a rotating or flipped instructional model to reduce the number of students on site by alternating days of attendance. When students attended school in-person, they stayed within their classrooms to limit movement in the building and prevent unnecessary contact. Grades kindergarten and grade one attended school five days a week. Since Jordan provided specialized instruction in a center-based program, her students attended school five days a week too. Some of the families requested fully online instruction. So, Jordan taught both face-to-face and online throughout the school day. For the first months of the school year, Jordan flipped back and forth throughout the day teaching students in the classroom and teaching students fully online. When providing online instruction, paraprofessionals or specialists attended to the students in the classroom. At one portion of the day, Jordan taught a co-located lesson using WebEx where both in person and online students attended. Jordan explained that this session was unmanageable due to the behavioral needs of her students in the classroom, so Jordan trained a paraprofessional to teach the online students synchronously while Jordan muted herself and taught the students in the classroom. Jordan continued to use the Seesaw program for instruction for both her online and face-to-face students. This was important to Jordan. She continued to implement the Seesaw lessons to support her students in developing more independence in the use of instructional technology. Jordan also needed to abide by COVID-19 guidelines restricting the ability for students to share materials in the classroom. Jordan

thoughtfully navigated effective specialized instruction for her students regardless of the conditions.

Jordan described her administration as highly supportive in her work. In October, Jordan was worried about the sustainability of the assigned teaching model. She approached her administration to describe the complexity of teaching both in person and online and solicited their support. When we met again for a winter interview, I learned that in fact Jordan's teaching role was reduced to only face-to-face instruction for her elementary students. Administration provided the option to continue teaching students both in person and online or pick up case management duties at the high school. Either scenario was considered necessary to fulfill a fulltime teaching position. Jordan chose the additional role of case managing the due process work for 17 students at the high school. Soon after this re-assignment, the governor mandated fully online instruction for all students due to the high number of COVID cases in the state. Jordan found herself teaching fully online and navigating the new role of a high school case manager. Given a more flexible online teaching schedule, Jordan networked with her new colleagues at the high school and plunged into the work. Although Jordan described this time during the school year as scary because of the excessive COVID cases, she also described her new relationships with the high school families positively. She stated:

I have been very surprised how comfortable it's been whenever I've interacted with them, whether it be in the meetings and things. And all those meetings have been virtual. Like, everyone has been so friendly and accommodating and willing to work together and appreciative. To me it seems like almost weird at first because I don't really know them, and we've never met in person. It's all online or on the phone or through email. But they seem to be very trusting. It's not like who are you? It's a little bit different

again, because we are never meeting in person and I never knew them in person at any point. Everyone is kind of adapting.

Jordan herself exemplifies how to be adaptive. During this school year, she shifted teaching roles multiple times using online and face-to-face instruction for her elementary level students. By mid-January, Jordan's students were attending school in person at least a couple days a week and by February all of the students at the elementary school were back five days a week. Jordan described the school year as being multiple school years because of the multitude of models required. When she reflected on her work in the spring interview, Jordan was still full of stamina and looking forward to teaching in the special education summer program.

Jordan managed legal work at the elementary school and at the high school, completing an extraordinary number of IEPs and special education evaluations. Although her work at the elementary school was not new, this year required different paperwork and requirements to implement individualized plans. In addition, Jordan needed to learn how to develop these legal processes and paperwork at the high school level while restricted to using virtual meetings and email.

Jordan navigated her responsibilities at two schools while participating in school and district committees. Jordan finds energy in exercising teacher leadership and working with others. Jordan reflected on her work this past school year with the school equity team. She stated:

I was asked to be a part of that at the beginning of the school year. Also, when I talk about relationships among my colleagues and things like that, being on that committee has been really nice. Not only for myself personally, also for my own confidence as a professional and leader in the building. It's connected me with other parts of the building, like grade level teachers. I'm not just living in my isolated sped world that we often get

stuck, especially in a pandemic, when we can't leave our classroom. So that's been really nice. It's given me those opportunities. So, I'm hoping to continue to be a part of that next year.

By remaining flexible and willing to adapt to change, Jordan adjusts and readjusts to her work as a special educator. She understands that the same differentiation required in teaching her students is also required in her professional work as a special educator. Most importantly, Jordan finds joy in the messiness of the work special educators often face.

In Jordan's words:

That's part of the fun of it. You sometimes have to fly by the seat of your pants in terms of thinking on your feet and problem solving in the minute. And that's one thing like, you know, it bothers me when other people complain instead of trying to find a solution. We can figure this out. We'll make it work. It'll be fine.

Case 2: Deno

Deno identifies as a male Latino and teaches in a center-based classroom for students with a special education label of autism spectrum disorders. Most of the students enrolled in Deno's elementary school are students of Color (70%), representing primarily Somali and Latino communities. Deno reported that 94% of the students attending his school receive free and reduced lunch services. Formerly a police officer, the 2020 - 2021 school year marks Deno's fifth year as a special education teacher. Deno participates in a variety of district committees and statewide initiatives and considers himself an advocate for students of Color.

Deno implements a restorative circles practice when engaging with his students and his families. Deno has navigated multiple challenges along with his families to ensure access to specialized services and considers his relationships with his families a "silver-lining" given the

stressors resulting from COVID-19. In March and April 2020 his school experienced tremendous difficulty ensuring all students could access online instruction during the stay-home mandate and distance learning. Deno's school issued Chromebooks to their students and was able to provide Comcast hotspots to many families. However, it took about seven to eight weeks to ensure that most learners could access online instruction. That spring, Deno used Zoom to provide synchronous instruction and the Seesaw program to provide asynchronous instruction to his students. As Deno adjusted his specialized instruction from his classroom to a fully online format, he quickly realized that he also need to adapt his instructional schedule to reach all of his learners. Deno worked with parents to outline a plan that aligned with their schedules, resulting in a very different timetable for instruction. Here's what Deno reported:

I was able to have really strong relationships with the parents going into this already. So, for a lot of my parents, education was like second or third on their list. Because they're wondering how they were going to work. Because a lot of my parents are in the food industry, and all of the food industry was closed. So, they were able to trust me and then I could work with them. But I think a lot of that was only due to us already having a relationship. So, it was a matter of just building a schedule with them and being extremely flexible. Like there were times I could only work with kids on Saturdays or Sundays.

Deno's instructional schedule continued to be extraordinary throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year. Furthermore, Deno found his schedule very different than his general education colleagues. At the start of the school year, the elementary school initiated a hybrid model (two days in school and two days fully asynchronous). Deno's students attended school four days a week or attended fully online. He was responsible for face-to-face, online, and co-located

instruction (simultaneous online and face-to-face instruction). Wednesday's were a welcomed day for planning, paperwork, or professional development and allowed for a school cleaning day. However, the Wednesday planning day only lasted for one month. In October, school administration identified Wednesday's an online instructional day as well. Now, Deno was required to teach five days a week with little or no preparation time built into the schedule. He recorded the following in his October documentation log:

Most teachers, including myself, have not found ways of managing and coping with the extra work. We are truly building the airplane as it is flying above a choppy sea! There is little down time as weekends consist of catching up, creating lesson plans, and fielding emails and phone calls from learners and parents.

In November, a state mandate shifted schools from in-person to fully online instruction in Minnesota due to high COVID-19 cases. Deno's entry now read:

At this point I can truly state that there is no "managing the work" by system or default. I cannot speak for general education teachers, but I do know that for sped teachers the work has doubled and our time for teaching has shrunk. I spend the majority of my time waiting for my learners to log in or spending time on the phone with parents trying to trouble shoot technical issues. There simply is no time to create a managing system or a way to cope with the work. It simply just must be completed.

As the vaccine began to be offered in the U.S. and COVID cases decreased, Deno's school reorganized to reopen. Due to intensive special education programming needs, Deno's students were allowed back to school in January before the general education population re-entered school in February. The general education teachers in Deno's school were offered a choice to teach face-to-face or fully online through the remainder of the school year. Deno was

not. While his general education colleagues taught solely face-to-face or fully online, Deno provided instruction five days a week in multiple modalities (face-to-face, online, and co-located instruction). In Deno's March log he reported the following:

Managing the work and coping have become an art form in itself. With every step that administrators and government officials take to try and "help" teachers, it actually just creates more paperwork that takes us away from spending quality teaching time with our learners.

Each time a programming model changed; special education teachers were required to revise IEPs for each student. The January shift back to school was the third revision of IEP paperwork for each of Deno's students in addition to the required annual processes. Since families were still provided a fully online option, Deno completed the necessary paperwork for families regardless if attending school in person or not. Deno continued to maintain continuous communication with his families and advocate on their behalf.

In March, the tenor, took a turn for the worse. Deno's special education department began to provide new directives for special education documentation. For the remainder of the school year, Deno needed to complete daily instructional service documentation for each student. He was required to take attendance for every student at the end of each hour, document how many service minutes each student received, and include notes on the lesson plan for each student. In addition, special education teachers were directed to contact parents or guardians of students receiving special education services in May to share information on available summer compensatory services. For each contact with a parent, the teachers were required to complete a due process form call a Prior Written Notice. This form identifies the programmatic decisions proposed by the district, the rationale for the proposed decision, and details of other options

considered. This parent communication formally logged in student records changed to a comprehensive due process document prepared and shared with the parent to ensure agreement or disagreement on the communication that ensued. Deno reported that if he talked to a parent six times about summer school options, this documentation was completed six times for this student's special education records. In Deno's May interview, he stated:

It's like a labor camp more than it is like teaching. And so what do you think that does to our teaching time, you know, because you're constantly just charting. You feel like you're a doctor that gave like open heart surgery and you're just charting every medication and every blood pressure. It's just like, it is so consuming. It's just like most teachers can't wait for the end of the year. This is the first year that they've had no special education teachers want to do summer school. They have no one. They're (special education administration) are so worried about delivering the minutes. They said we'll pay for extra longer summer school days. It used to be three or four hours. Now it's an entire day. If the parents want it. They don't have to take it. But there's no one to teach. No one wants to go through that.

Deno navigated a very different school year, always willing to go the extra mile for his students and his families. Still, he commented that the paperwork required this last school year was "killing any kind of spirit." Regardless of his overflowing work schedule and responsibilities, Deno took time to meet with state legislators and the governor to share information on the current role of the special educator. Deno commented: "This isn't about easing the tension of teachers. It's about providing better services for the students." Fortunately, Deno ended this school year not broken in spirit, but looking forward to change.

In Deno's words:

I think that what drives me right now is being a teacher, and I had been a teacher pre-COVID. I already had those relationships. Those connections with my parents and learners and so forth. So, when the pandemic comes along, that just strengthens that for me.

Case 3: Christine

Christine identifies as a White female. She teaches in a large middle school composed primarily of students of Color. The families speak multiple languages in her middle school in addition to English. Christine reported that 68% of the students enrolled receive free and reduce lunch services. Students attending Christine's school had the option to attend school during the 2020 – 2021 school year in a hybrid model or full online. The teachers were also offered choices in how they would prefer to teach that year. Christine chose to teach the students in her special education center-based program enrolled in the fully online model. Christine and her partner, already parents of one child, were planning to adopt a baby in the fall. An online teaching assignment appeared to be a reasonable choice given the needed time off and the risk of COVID for their young family.

Although Christine approached the 2020 – 2021 school year with 21 years of teaching experience (10 years as a special educator), the stress of the unknown before the start of the school year was prevalent, and coping with the changes in her work in the beginning months continued to be complicated. Teaching fully online, Christine missed the camaraderie and interaction with her colleagues, and she missed seeing students in person. Most surprising to Christine was the difference in her online experience from the previous spring. Even when teaching in the initial fully online distance learning model, she could team with her co-teacher to

provide instruction and bounce around ideas and solve student issues. When reflecting on her work with her co-teacher during distance learning (spring, 2020), Christine stated:

When I say we are one, I'm not kidding. Like I have never worked with somebody who is so one. I mean, it's kind of funny when I walk down the hallway, somebody will be like, where's (co-teacher's name)? It was weird to not be in the same room with her. But we still were very much like one. I would message her and say, I'm copying you on every email. She's like, oh, I was just going to tell you that I'm copying you on every email. We just clicked on pretty much everything. We talked, like what about this? This kid isn't logging in. How can I help you with this? This parent called me instead of calling you. This is what they said. We just filled each other in on what was going well, what we were struggling with, and what we needed help with. She's like, I can't figure out how to teach this to my kids. Then I'm like, oh, well, what about doing this? So, we still had our collaboration that we normally had in the classroom, just like this. Very comforting and nice.

Christine and her co-teacher used Peardeck to provide interactive online instruction to their students during the stay-home mandate. Using GoGuardian as an interface program, they were able to monitor their students' work in real-time. Her co-teacher and paraprofessionals worked together to group students effectively and interact with their students, using the phone, text and email. The online instructional experience didn't happen immediately. Christine and her team spent an excessive amount of time teaching their students how to access online instruction using teacher made videos and a lot of student interaction.

Instruction on how to log on and access the online work paid off, as most students were seasoned online learners in the fall. However, Christine now needed to shift her time to

developing a useful online middle school schedule and integrate new instructional technologies such as Google Meets and other asynchronous programs. Christine developed an online instructional schedule later duplicated by her school and used to replace the initial school schedule. She worked to transform all of her classroom instructional workboxes into online Peardeck or virtual workboxes. Christine spent hundreds of hours in the design of the virtual workboxes. The virtual workboxes needed to align with the individual learning needs of her students to provide the required specialized services and accountability to the IEP. In addition, Christine was directed to complete the new required due process paperwork, called the Contingency Learning Plan (COVID IEP) for each learner on her caseload. Christine was not a novice in the excessive time required to begin a school year, yet this school year was very different. The work demands were at least triple in amount, and Christine felt isolated in her fully online model. Christine's co-worker was assigned the face-to-face instruction for students attending school in person. In Christine's October interview, she stated:

There's just this feeling of being so alone. My lead teacher is like, just let me know how I help you. I literally have no idea because I feel so isolated and alone. I don't think there's any way that anybody can help me.

In November when all school programs shifted to fully online instruction, Christine experienced a change in her isolation since she was able to again co-teach with her colleague and access the support of the program paraprofessionals. This period of fully online instruction was not without its challenges. Again, the students not accustomed to the online instruction required tremendous support to transition back to a fully online model. Christine reported that this lapse of online engagement for some students was frustrating for her experienced online students to endure. They grew impatient as they waited for their classmates to regain some online

competency. Everyone felt the change. Now in a fully online format, Christine's co-teacher recognized the extraordinary workload she carried this school year. To fulfill her full-time position, she was the primary in-person teacher for their program and was assigned additional online instruction with other students. When the COVID cases decreased and their program shifted back to offering the in-person model again, Christine manipulated her fully online instructional schedule to go into school for a short period midday. She relieved her co-teacher and provided in-person instruction to some students. Even this short time back in the school building was a welcome relief from the isolation she felt teaching solely from home.

Although Christine completed the school year with some respite from her online instruction through her daily jaunts back to school, she faced multiple unprecedented demands. Right before spring, she and her team packed up and moved her entire classroom to a new location due to construction in the building. In April, the middle school provided the option of a four day a week in-person instructional schedule to students. Even though none of Christine's online students were not switching to that model, she was required to rewrite all of her student's Contingency Learning Plans in addition to the annual due process work required. The chaos and the weight of the year was apparent. In the May interview she stated:

I don't think any of us believe that it's going to end, because it's been such a hard year.

And like you, you don't believe it until it happens, until that last day when you give your kids a hug goodbye and leave. Then it's done. It just feels like it's never going to come.

Reflecting on the year, Christine remained positive and shared how her school increased its digital literacy and created a more responsive learning community. She spoke of the powerful professional development her school experienced as they worked to develop a more equitable organization. Christine felt supported by her professional community and shared that they

communicated with more ease and truth in an online format. She commented that the online technology offered a more intimate setting for interacting by using the breakout room feature or a no-video feature. She also recognized additional resources provided by her district for digital tools, devices, and training in response to the school year's online instructional demands.

Although Christine's school would be considered significant in enrollment, she sought out the collaboration of her team and the collegial support of the larger school community. Clearly, Christine understood that she found professional fulfillment in the company of others.

In Christine's words:

Whether I knew it before or not, like, I work most effectively with other people. It doesn't even have to be this particular co-teacher. We're like two peas in a pod. But I work more effectively even with my paras having that camaraderie. Just spaces to bounce things off each other, we were missing at the beginning of the year.

Case 4: Lizzie

Lizzie identifies as a White female. She teaches in a center-based program for mild to moderate, moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, and students identified with autism. Her program is housed in the high school where she has taught for six years. The high school would be considered significant in enrollment (over 2000 students) and located in an upper-class and primarily White community. Lizzie reported that 10% of the student population requires free or reduced lunch services. The high school offered hybrid or fully online models for the 2020 – 2021 school year. Due to special education needs, Lizzie's students were afforded a four day a week face-to-face schedule (one day asynchronous) for much of the school year, although some of her families opted for a fully online program.

Lizzie had difficulty transitioning to an online model in the onset of distance learning, spring 2020. She began her summer interview immediately after the 2019 – 2020 school reporting the following:

If you want to know how I felt about it going into it, I was extremely anxious and nervous going into it because I believed that I could not do what I needed to do to serve these kids. Because they use their iPads to communicate. And they read body language and I read body language; you know? So, if you're in the same space, you can see a kid's face and go, oh, oh, you don't like that. Or, okay, would you like something else? Or would you like this or this? You can give them choices, right? You can read what they need and give them choices and adapt in their presence. So, the first day I got on with my principal and my lead, and I just burst out in tears. I said, I just don't think I can do this.

However, Lizzie learned to make online instruction happen for her learners. She met with her students synchronously, providing a similar learning routine to the former classroom instruction. Her instructional sessions included a morning meeting and intensive language instruction using core vocabulary. Lizzie even started writing stories for her students to differentiate their learning using a language-based literacy approach and her own teacher designed curriculum. She focused on providing intensive instruction in reading, language, and mathematics. She also made community-based instruction accessible through functional learning activities. Over time, Lizzie provided synchronous sessions using Google slide presentations, asynchronous activities using the individualized Vizzle program, and packet work for her students during the spring distance learning state mandate. Lizzie even video recorded the read alouds using Screen-cast and publishing the videos for her students through YouTube.

The biggest challenge was ensuring that her students had the support they needed at their home to access the instruction and engage in the activities. Given the developmental needs of her students, they were not able to log on to the internet themselves or engage in the instruction without support. Typically, the students in Lizzie's classroom setting would have just about one-to-one paraprofessional support due to cognitive, behavioral, language and adaptive living skill needs. Lizzie worked with parents, caregivers, and even the siblings of her students to promote engagement in distance learning activities. Lizzie sent out an instructional plan for the week to her families, including instructional materials and links to instructional videos or activities. Lizzie created a QR code for each student so parents would not need to remember student email or school network information. Lizzie worked tirelessly to create ease for her families and student access to instruction. Lizzie connected with many families daily, reminding them through text or a phone call that a virtual session started. Depending on the family, students engaged in the learning activities or not. Lizzie stated:

It got to be hard for the families because they had other things and other students, other children in the family. And I got discouraged because I didn't really feel like I was making an impact or whether it (distance learning) was making any difference or not.

Although Lizzie developed many new skills as an online teacher, she never considered online teaching of value for her students. In her summer, 2020 interview she stated:

I love my job. I'm good at my job. But my job needs to be done in person... And that's the place where I feel most comfortable in my skin. So, what you're asking me to do when you're asking me to do this kind of teaching (online), is asking a fish to climb a tree. That's what it is.

During the 2020 – 2021 school year, Lizzy’s online teaching became more complex. Lizzy was required to teach in a co-located classroom setting. She continued to send out weekly plans to fully online students in her program while also developing plans for face-to-face instruction. Lizzie reported that her district never provided training for online instruction. She figured things out on her own or with the occasional support of a colleague. At one point, a paraprofessional helped by bringing an additional microphone to support the online audio needs for co-located instruction. The strain of navigating co-located instruction was real for Lizzie. In February, Lizzie reported on her monthly log that she even experienced a panic attack at school in response to technology issues. She stated:

Had a full-blown panic attack!!! Was trying to figure out tech for the online kids. Had 3 kids in-person and two kids on the google meet. The camera wouldn’t let me in. Ran down to Media Center. No one could help me. They recommended I do a restart. I did a restart. The camera finally let me in. Tried to get into student’s portal. The prompt came up to reset the password which I know from past experience we do not have the rights to do. IT had worked with me and we created QR codes, which work great for our kids as long as they don’t do a district wide reset! Ran back down to Media Center. Still no one could help me. As I was walking back, with each step, I was saying in my head, “See I told you this is impossible!” By the time I got back to the classroom, I couldn’t breathe or talk. I went to a friend and she didn’t understand what was happening. I ended up going to the counselor and shutting the door. But 6 students and 3 adults were in the classroom waiting for me. They had no idea.

Lizzie spent most of the school year teaching four days a week in a co-located setting for multiple periods throughout the day. The only respite during the week was the one-day

asynchronous instructional day. On this day, Lizzie attended meetings and attempted to catch up with her work. Along with the rest of the state, Lizzie also taught fully online during the fall state mandate due to high COVID cases. When student face-to-face instruction was allowed, Lizzie's students remained in the classroom the entire day. Lizzie's students were exempt from wearing masks due to medical reasons or the inability to communicate verbally. To prevent the potential spread of COVID-19, they were not allowed to attend any general education classes. Lizzie and her paraprofessionals did not have any non-student contact time when students were in session.

During the school year, Lizzie was diagnosed with COVID-19. Her diagnosis also fell close to the mandated distance learning period, so she was able to teach from home. Other teachers in the program were also diagnosed with COVID-19 or were out for other medical or personal reasons. Since there were no substitute teachers available, they would distribute students into Lizzie's classroom and other special education programs. In January, Lizzie took a short leave for medical reasons (non-mental health) herself.

Lizzie intentionally worked to take care of herself during the school year. Her self-care was important since she was experiencing multiple stressors at work. Her day-in-day-out interactions with parents were often difficult. She was often blamed for school or district-wide scheduling changes. In the spring, two of the families left the district. Lizzy reported that her administration was also not supportive. In her spring interview, Lizzie stated:

This year kind of brought to light the district's weaknesses. Like the lack of policies, the lack of procedures, the lack of caring, the lack of help, the apathy toward workers that are really good workers. Because they'll stay, they'll be fine, they'll be OK, they'll make it work. You know what? I'm really a good worker. I'm really professional and I really care.

They take advantage of people that care about their students and they say. Too bad, so sad. Just figure it out.

Outside of school, Lizzy took walks, read inspirational text, and pre-planned ways to keep herself “in the Zen” during the school day. Lizzie also dedicated additional time to her studies and an internship in a doctoral program. She commented that the monthly logging for the research study was also helpful for her self-care. The journaling gave her an outlet for her feelings and thoughts. In the spring interview, Lizzie reported, “This was the hardest year I’ve ever experienced. For many reasons.”

In Lizzie’s words:

Is it always fun? No. But truly I feel like I'm making a difference in their (student's) lives. So that's why I stay. But I hope that. I hope that the delivery model changes because this doesn't work for me.

Themes Across Cases

By examining the experiences of four SpEdTs in Minnesota from the onset of the health pandemic and through the following school year, I described the impact of Coronavirus Disease - 19 (COVID-19) on their work. The cases provide examples of how special educators adapted specialized instruction and their use of instructional technology. They also provided examples of how they interacted and worked to maintain relationships with parents and colleagues. Lastly, these educators shared how they attempted to cope with, manage, adapt or change their work in response to the safety and health concerns required during the COVID-19 health pandemic. In Christine’s May documentation log, she stated, “Everyone is just feeling the fatigue of this year and crawling to the finish line.” This next section describes the findings of these four cases

related to two main themes: (1) Extraordinary Workload and (2) Collaboration and Collegial Support. Table 6.1 presents a summary of the identified themes.

Table 6.1

Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes and Sub-Themes	Summary	Voice of the Participants
1. Extraordinary Workload	Special educators conducted different (unordinary) work duties requiring extreme attention. An inordinate amount of time was required to learn new skills and approaches to complete the work.	<i>It is hard, this is all just very hard. I know the beginnings of school years are always bad and busy, but this feels like double the work with less than half the gain, like in student growth.</i> Christine
1.1 New Approaches to Instruction and Use of Instructional Technology	Special educators facilitated synchronous, asynchronous, face-to-face instructions and multiple combinations of these instructional formats in the teaching.	<i>It is taxing to have some students 100% online and the others in-person. There are times that you are teaching some learners online and some right in front of you at the same time.</i> Deno
1.2 Managing Legal Processes and Documentation	Special educators were required to manage more legal due process work and documentation due to multiple programmatic changes in instructional models and schedules (e.g., fully online, face-to-face, hybrid).	<i>We did Contingency Learning Plans (CLP) in the beginning of the year so we didn't ever have to do them again. And they're like, yeah, but now it's four days a week instead of one day a week. And I advocated and advocated and advocated because none of my kids are coming in. None of them are coming in. None of them, not one of the ten is going to choose to come in. You still need to redo the CLP, so it meets coming in four days a week.</i> Christine
2. Collaboration and Collegial Support	Special educators attempted to cope with and manage changes in their work with the support of others. They found opportunities for reciprocity in their collegial relationships and teacher leadership.	<i>She personally recognized each one of us on our team for all the individual things that we bring to this group. And just before we jumped off our our website, I was like, I'm going to join the warm, fuzzy train and just make sure we recognized her for her leadership. I feel like it's the first time in the four years that I've been at the school that we've had a very</i>

*sound leader that's bringing this
team of people together.*
Jordan

Extraordinary Workload

Special educators manage multiple tasks, including the design of intensive intervention, communication and collaboration with parents and colleagues, and legal processes and paperwork. Each of the participants featured in the case studies shared examples of how they needed to attend to an extraordinary amount of work during COVID- 19. In the spring of 2020, participants faced additional work demands given the need to acquire new learning for online instruction and the readjustment required to provide specialized services to their students. Adapting and readapting to work changes appeared to continue throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year as teaching shifted across multiple teaching models, and districts issued new guidelines for due process work and legal processes.

New Approaches to Instruction and Use of Instructional Technology

Each of the participants developed new skills in instructional technology and how they managed their work using technology. Before the spring 2020 state-mandated distance learning order, the featured special educators had limited capacity to use technology in their teaching. With or without school or district training, each participant learned new instructional programs (e.g., Seesaw, Peardeck) and then manipulated the instructional technology by differentiating and individualizing the programs to be accessible and useful for the intensive instruction students required. They also continued to implement what they had learned in the spring into their learning environment the following school year. Across cases, they expanded their use of instructional technology in the 2020 – 2021 school year by integrating additional technology or refining their current practice. Deno reported the addition of Moby Max in the fall to support asynchronous student work. Jordan continued to use Seesaw with her students in person, working with the paraprofessionals to systematically decrease the support students would need to

use the program more independently. Christine developed virtual workboxes for fully online use to replicate the instruction and assignments already developed as physical materials or workboxes in her classroom. Lizzie continued to use a weekly plan using Google Docs to plan her week and communicate with parents. She also reflected on her professional growth in the spring interview. Lizzie stated:

The gratitude for me that it (COVID) really upped to my digital game in teaching. Like I totally know how to make my way around a Google Slide Prezi, a Google doc. I know how to create curriculum online now, like, I'm not afraid of any of that. Whereas before it would have been all like worksheets or projects or something where it would have been very kinesthetic. Which is important for the population that I teach. However, you can't provide that when you're told you absolutely can't you can't hand them anything, you can't walk into their house, you can't be in the same room with them, basically. And so, I really learned to up my digital game. I think that was a blessing. So that was a change in me.

These changes to the instruction required an excessive amount of time to develop. In addition, they needed to teach students how to use the technology. Christine stated in her November log:

No new added tech added this month, just continuing to get better at the things we have at our disposal. The kiddos are really getting good at all the tech we currently have, and we are able to really work on maintaining and increasing their skills instead of spending so so much time just teaching the technology that we are using.

Surprisingly, teachers were learning about technology at such a rapid pace that they didn't even have a name for their work. For example, Jordan, Deno, and Lizzie all reported teaching in a co-located format yet never labeled the approach. Instead, they described it to me.

Jordan stated in her fall interview, “Just recently though, I was reading the book to everyone like, in person and on the computer all at once.” Deno explained his co-located instruction in his fall log, “It is taxing to have some students 100% online and the others in-person. There are times that you are teaching some learners online and some right in front of you at the same time.” Lizzie shared in her fall interview how she was learning to manage co-located instruction so all would benefit. She stated:

One of my paras brought a mic and my supervisor gave me an external camera, which was really helpful. Otherwise, I would have had to stand at my computer while I was teaching from the Smart Board. So, it was a nice way to be able to sit down within the circle of the kids and look at the board as I presented. Then I also taught. I also had kids virtually. So, it was kind of this three-way thing. Then the para each had to have a Chromebook issued to them so that they could get on the meeting as well.”

I present these examples to demonstrate the lack of formal training for the technology that teachers were required to provide. Many of the skills teachers learned were self-taught or developed as team members problem solved to respond to the urgent instructional demands they faced. In addition to managing the acquisition of these new skills, participants were responsible for teaching duties very different than their general education peers. For at least a portion of the school year or the entire school year, Deno, Jordan, and Lizzie taught in co-located learning environments. Their general education peers taught online or face-to-face. The school schedules were different in all of the cases. Due to the intensive needs of their students, these SpEdTs were required to teach more days in the week and had contact with their students more hours than typically scheduled in a non-COVID school year. In the fall interview, Lizzie stated:

We would sit down on Friday afternoon after music therapy, which is when we have it. And we just look at each other at the table, and we go, we are toast. We were just toast every Friday because nobody ever got a break.

Throughout the school year, Lizzie's students could not attend general education classes because of the differences in the general education and special education schedules or due to the mask exemption provided to her students. Therefore, Lizzy missed the two planning times scheduled for the day. Deno also shared the differences in his instructional schedule in comparison to his general education colleagues. During the winter interview, Deno reflected on the time dedicated to online instruction. He stated:

So, November the gen ed teachers and I of course, are still in a distance learning scenario. Things have really relaxed for the gen ed teachers, which is good. They're down to teaching from 9:30 to 10:30. And then 1 to 2... Sped isn't that coordinated because of our learners are at different learning spots. We don't have the luxury to have like one big group at a certain time because our kids are at such different learning points. So, we have to pretty much do one on one with our learners...But our teaching days starts at nine o'clock and we literally teach the entire six, seven hours, I'm going from one student to another student.

The intensive instructional schedule left little or no time to collaborate with others or complete required due process work. Across cases, participants shared the difficulty in managing the workload. In addition, continuous changes in the necessary due process work and documentation compounded the situation.

Managing Legal Processes and Documentation

Due process paperwork and documentation are typical responsibilities for special educators. They are required to complete case management work thoroughly and by following dictated timelines. Managing programmatic processes and legal paperwork requires one to be organized and exercise practical time management skills. During COVID-19, special educators faced a tremendous challenge in completing an extreme amount of paperwork. The continuous changes in instructional models (e.g., distance learning, hybrid, face-to-face) required exorbitant legal work and documentation. When models changed, SpEdTs revised student IEPs to reflect the changes in services. Paperwork changes started at the onset of the health pandemic when instruction shifted to distance learning and then continued into the following school year. In spring 2020, many districts directed SpEdTs to communicate with parents and develop a different version of the IEP called Individual Distance Learning Plans (IDLPs). At the start of the 2020 – 2021 school year, this process changed to a Contingency Learning Plan (CLP) for the new school year. Christine logged this information in September:

Trying to learn about the NEW contingency plans we have to write. Super frustrated the IDLPs do not work for the model we are doing this fall. It seems that no matter what there is just TONS of paperwork thrown at SPED every time there is a change. This paperwork will take me HOURS to complete for my kiddos- and then, I'll need to do them all again soon when I have their IEPs in November and December.

Districts required IEP revisions or CLPs in the beginning of the school year, at annual IEP meetings, and when the school shifted learning models. Deno commented in his winter interview:

The parents and due process, in this world we live in now. School is not Monday through Friday. And it's definitely not an eight to four or eight to five job. It's almost seven days a

week, 24 hours a day. To get due process processed on time, I've had to, like, meet with parents on Saturday and Sundays, weekends. It's my last resort.

This revision to the paperwork was required even when parents were not changing their preferences on how their students would attend school. The CLP was initiated as a process to support different scenarios for the school year. However, due to the unpredictable changes in school models, SpEdTs were still required to make multiple revisions to the plans. In the spring interview, Christine stated:

We did CLPs, so we didn't ever have to do them again. And they're like, yeah, but now it's four days a week instead of one day a week. And I advocated and advocated and advocated because none of my kids are coming in. None of them are coming in. None of them, not one of the 10 is going to choose to come in. You still need to redo the CLP, so it meets coming in four days a week.

In addition to the changes in IEP paperwork, Deno reported additional documentation required.

In the spring interview, Deno shared:

For each one of our children, not only does the school take attendance, we personally have to take attendance every day, and at the end of every hour for each student. So, for each student, say they have writing with me and then they have math later on, we have to put the student was there. Then in each block we have to tell how many service minutes the student got. Then we have to put notes, clarifying what the lesson plan was.

During the health pandemic, the work for SpEdTs was extraordinary. Changes in their work required additional time and participants often worked beyond the typical school hours to attend to their professional responsibilities. The workload was extreme.

Collaboration and Collegial Support

Special educators adhere to a variety of professional standards. These standards extend beyond instructional and due process tasks. The professional standards provide direction on how to conduct oneself in the profession. An essential professional role of the special educator requires the ability to work with others to develop mutual goals and outcomes for the students they teach. Although the professional standards identify a need to collaborate with others to design specialized programming, the participants reported the necessity to collaborate with others for their own professional benefit. Participants needed collaboration and collegial support to cope with their work during a health pandemic.

In each case, participants described their relationships with colleagues often. Christine continuously reported on the status of her professional life in references to her co-teacher. Christine was working from home and teaching online for most of the 2020 – 2021 school year. In the fall, she repeatedly spoke of the isolation she was experiencing due to the inability to work closely with her co-teacher. In her winter interview, she reported relief from her isolation when her co-teacher joined her in fully online instruction. She stated:

Something else that happened was that my co-teacher, since they went distance, my co-teacher and I got to teach together again. Which was super nice. We brought all the kids in together into one group, and then we would split off into smaller Google Meets for the different levels. And it was just so much nicer to have a co-teacher to kind of ping things off of again. And she understood what I was doing.

After the mandated distance learning in the fall through winter, Christine manipulated her schedule to teach part-time at school. Then as school shifted to an in-person model in the spring, she was back working with her co-teacher for the remainder of the school year. In the spring interview, she commented:

I work most effectively with other people. Like it doesn't even have to be this particular co-teacher. We're like two peas in a pod. But like, I work more effectively even with my paras and having that camaraderie. Just spaces to bounce things off of each other. We were missing that at the beginning of the year. This end of the year has just felt, as much as I didn't want to go back. I'm actually quite thankful that we're all in the building and we're all kind of together. Because you just do feel so much less alone in what you're doing. I don't work well in that space of being alone. I persevere on this is so hard. This is so hard. This is so hard. This is so hard, with nobody to talk to. And so, by having that, even the paras, or even just the students to kind of have that like, this is hard. And everyone's like, yeah, this is hard. And then we laugh and joke about it. It just lightens it and it makes it easier.

The support of colleagues helped participants to cope with the health pandemic and related implications. Participants relied on their colleagues. For example, Lizzie enlisted the support of her team to help her with her transition to co-located instruction. Deno reported on several occasions the support of his special education colleagues. Reflecting on the onset of COVID-19 and into the following school year, Jordan stated in the spring interview:

Going back to the last spring when this is all new and everyone, we were all at home. It brought people together so much because we were all going through this like crazy, weird experience kind of thing together and figuring things out. Everyone was so willing to support one another. And, you know, certain people had strengths with certain pieces of technology and were willing to help out. And so, I think we continued that. At least for me, in the building this year, it's been much of the same. Everybody has just been willing to work together and keep each other safe.

Unfortunately, participants did not report consistent support from their colleagues due to a variety of factors. Lack of time was a primary factor. For example, Deno reported on the collaborative work prior to the start of the school year to “discuss curriculum, student needs, and communicating with parents in various forms.” From that point on, he primarily reported on the inability to work with other due to the amount of work and lack of time. In his November log he reported:

There are no supports from colleagues as all sped teachers are simply buried by lack of time or of the burden of the added workloads. Wednesdays were our PD days but they have now taken even those away so we can “instruct” more. I have literally not seen my co-teacher in over a month due to the current workloads. I have also been asked to be on several leadership teams that confront systemic racism in institutions which is work I love to do but I feel depressed as it takes away from my teachings.

Lizzy also inconsistently reported on collegial support throughout the school year. She was especially disappointed in the lack of support from her administration. In her spring interview she offered this advice, “My suggestion would be for teachers going into leadership. Care about those around you. Because there's going to be power in your caring and your relationships for the people around you.”

When examining the area of collegial collaboration, participants also described reciprocity in their relationships. Each participant reported on their support to others or opportunities for teacher leadership. Lizzy found purpose in her ongoing scholarship and administrative licensing program work. She also shared fulfillment in curriculum development she and a colleague were developing throughout the school year. Christine provided support and guidance to new SpEdTs in her school. She also presented a model for an instructional schedule

that her principal implemented for the entire school. Both Jordan and Deno reported on the leadership opportunities in various school, district, or state-wide initiatives. Deno also was a model for his families and colleagues on the benefits of using restorative practice circles to support valuing relationships with others.

Summary

The case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate themes for how the work of SpEdTs changed due to the COVID-19 health pandemic. Participants shared their experiences as they navigated an extreme workload, often seeking or missing the support and collaborative work with their colleagues. Special educators faced different work and extra-ordinary work duties. They spent an excessive amount of time learning new skills and approaches, often without training. These SpEdTs were required to teach various models, including online synchronous, face-to-face, and co-located instructional formats. Special educators also navigated an extra-ordinary amount of legal paperwork and revisions as instructional models shifted across multiple formats and instructional schedules throughout the school year. Special educators attempted to cope with and manage changes in their work, seeking the support of others. They solicited collegial relationships with their school or district, working to eliminate isolation and stress. When those relationships were not available, they reached out and engaged in statewide or other professional pursuits. Lastly, each special educator featured in the cases exercised some aspect of teacher leadership as they worked to gain some sense of control and safety during this unprecedented phenomenon.

This chapter describes four cases to demonstrate how SpEdTs pursued their work during the COVID-19 health pandemic. Each of them exited the 2020 – 2021 school year with different experiences: however, each emulated professional growth and resiliency. Regardless of the

changes, the workload, or the day-in-day-out activities to complete, these special educators navigated their work with a unique sense of direction and fortitude throughout this turbulent school year. I close this chapter with enduring gratitude for their participation in this research and admiration for their exceptional work. In conclusion, I share one last quote from Christine, “Thank God it's over, really. I mean, that's pretty much it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS

Vivian and Hormann (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Hormann & Vivian 2005; Vivian & Hormann 2012, 2015) combine research and practice in clinical trauma and organizational development to describe trauma from a systemic level. This frame of reference helps explain positive or damaging patterns within an organization and the implications for the organization and the individuals who are a member. I use their ideas to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 health pandemic on the work of special educators. My analysis draws on the concept of organizational trauma to better understand the experiences of the SpEdTs who participated in my study. I also integrate Noddings ethic of care (1984) into the analysis to understand better the impact of organizational trauma on the individuals who work there.

First, I will explain Vivian and Hormann's ideas on the work-culture connection. I use this model to describe the relationship between the individuals drawn to the work, the work, and the work culture. I have renamed this work-culture connection the *dynamic organizational trio*. I will embed Noddings ethic of care within this conceptual framework. Then, I discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the current educational system using Vivian and Hormann's concepts on cumulative organizational trauma. I expose characteristics in the work culture during the health pandemic resembling organizational trauma. I describe a process for authentically examining the organization to collectively act and make positive changes. The chapter closes with a summary to explain how systemic analysis supports a restructuring of the work of special educators moving forward.

The Dynamic Organizational Trio Revisited

Trauma-informed practices are recognized within many human service organizations to detect and attend to vicarious trauma and promote wellness for employees (Manian et al., 2021).

Secondary trauma or compassion fatigue is one way to explain SpEdT burnout (Hoffman et al., 2007). Research on SpEdT burnout points out individual characteristics that mitigate risk factors for teachers (Brittle, 2020). According to Brunsting and colleagues (2014), school or work-related factors such as role dissonance or conflict may also influence burnout. To analyze the experiences of special educators during the health pandemic, I incorporated these multiple perspectives while recognizing the interaction between the individual and the work culture. This stance shifts attention from solely isolating trauma as a matter for the individual employee or teacher to deal with, to a more comprehensive stance recognizing the relationship between the work culture and the individuals who are employee in the organization.

Vivian and Hormann explain how systems can negatively impact individuals (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Hormann & Vivian 2005; Vivian & Hormann 2012, 2015). Furthermore they theorize that organizations themselves can be traumatized (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Hormann & Vivian 2005; Kahn 2005; Stein 2004; Vivian & Hormann 2012, 2015; Volkan 2004) and demonstrate patterns that influence traumatization for the individuals who are a member of the organization. Using Vivian and Hormann's framework for organizational trauma, a collective acceptance is required to face reality, find meaning, and reconstruct organizational resiliency.

According to Vivian and Hormann (2013), the individual, the work required within an organization and the work culture (e.g., policies, routines) generate organizational outcomes. I renamed this work culture connection the *dynamic organizational trio*. It is essential to examine each area of the trio separately and, in sum, to understand how each part influences one another. In other words, when we can better understand the trauma experienced by an organization, a more comprehensive investigation can instill change across multiple aspects of the system to

create impactful change instead of blaming the individuals who work there. As members of an organization share their work experiences and trauma, their individual and collective stories bring a deeper understanding of the organizational change needed to fulfill individual, work, and work culture alignment.

The Individual - Susceptibility of Trauma for the Special Educator Revisited

Many special educators are attracted to the profession given a genuine value in caring for others or ethic of care (Noddings, 1984). I asked special educators why they continued to teach, given the onslaught of stress and the upheaval to their lifestyles due to COVID-19. All of these educators shared how they cared for their students and the outcomes they could achieve. Their choice of profession was all about the students. One special educator joked that the pay was the same as working at the local liquor store. Regardless of an occasional jest, SpEdTs chose the profession because they cared about their students and families. Although this care appears positive, it also suggests a possibility for vulnerability and trauma.

The care required during the health pandemic was different. Special educators spent countless hours above and beyond their workday attending to the special education programming of their students. They were in repeated interactions with families and parents to adjust instructional schedules, engage students in online work, and complete multiple student learning plans. They changed and readjusted intensive interventions to promote learning and acquisition of individual learning goals. To ensure special education programming during the health pandemic, SpEdTs were responsive to student and parent needs. They helped secure internet hotspots and listened when parents needed advice or consult.

On the surface, the care extended to others appears positive and even admirable. However, special educators reported a loss of personal time and work boundaries, exhaustion,

helplessness, and in some instances, anxiety. Repeated patterns of extreme care are unsustainable for the individual resulting in burnout, physical or mental symptoms, or a loss of fulfillment in the profession. Furthermore, these repeated patterns of excessive care could have been normalized in the school culture and be harmful to the school or special education system. This level of care requires superheroes, not caring humans.

The Work – Pandemic Specialize Education Programming

Individuals are drawn to the work because of the very nature of the organizations work (Vivian & Hormann, 2013). The special education processes and policies mandate a care of the individual student or a student-centered approach to educational planning. Understanding the unique learning profile of each student receiving special education services is fundamental in designing and implementing specialized programming. This knowledge of the learner is used to individualize or differentiate instruction or intervention to increase student learning.

At the onset of the health pandemic, special educators were not able to use available online instruction without some individualization. Care of student programming involved hundreds of hours as special educators individualized online instruction to meet the learning needs of their learners. Manipulating and differentiating online instruction was necessary to promote student access and engagement with the technology. Special educators developed video tutorials for their students on how to access online platforms or programs. They developed digital barcodes or QR codes for students to access district platforms and eliminate the need for remembering passwords. Special educators developed instructional videos from their homes replicating a setting like their classroom. They differentiated programs to allow multiple means to engage in online instruction or demonstrate learning using audio response, multiple-choice visual options, or writing. Special educators digitized instructional materials previously

developed over years of teaching. SpEdTs not only learned to use new technologies, but they also learned to adapt online instruction for their students.

The work of a special educator is also collaborative. Individuals are drawn to the work because they themselves are attracted to a caregiving organization or system where people work together to meet intended outcomes. The need to collaborate increased in pandemic programming. SpEdTs reported a dependency on parents or families during distance learning or periods of fully online instruction. Special educators coached parents or caregivers on accessing technology to support their students from home. Discussion with parents included academic and non-academic tutoring to ensure students continued to learn during distance learning. This role release from teacher to parent exemplifies Noddings' ethical principle of individual growth through relations with others. Special education teachers relied on parents, and parents relied on the relationship with their student's teacher. In many cases, special educators developed better relationships with parents because of the shared experience of treading the pandemic together.

Individual growth and the relationship (or lack of) with colleagues was also a prevalent topic SpEdTs reported on during pandemic programming. Special educators learned new skills because of the support of their colleagues. They also shared difficulty coping when isolated from colleagues. The required online teaching or restrictions to remain in classroom spaces prevented casual as well as scheduled patterns of interaction with colleagues. Special educators mourned the loss of collegial support and interaction or acknowledged the shared experience with colleagues in pandemic programming. Special educators reported that the support of their colleagues a primary reason they were able to endure the continuous change and readjustments needed during the health pandemic.

The Work Culture – Continuous Change and Readjustment

The work culture requires care in the programming of specialized services for the individual student. Systems for accountability like the Individual Education Program (IEP) are one example of how SpEdTs monitor and document student learning overtime. A level of accountability is important to meet student learning goals and reach intended life outcomes.

Noddings (1984) conveys an ethic of care as moral, for caring is conceivably at the onset or pre-act without consideration of reciprocal response. Special educators described their care in the extreme effort and time required to complete their pandemic programming work. Special educators are not strangers to managing multiple responsibilities; however, given the shifts in program models from distance learning to numerous models throughout the 2020 -2021 school year, paperwork appeared to triple in amount. Special educators were required to write and re-write the traditional individual educational program (IEP) every time there was a change in a teaching model (e.g., fully distance to face-to-face). Documentation on the plan included every possible program model available to the student, regardless of the student or family preference. Special educators exemplified Noddings' ethic of care by working above and beyond ordinary responsibilities and expectations.

At the onset of the health pandemic, special educator shared their experiences in readjusting specialized services primarily within the context of what they could or could not do for their students. As the pandemic spilled into the following school year, SpEdTs endured extraordinary work conditions to meet their learners' special educational programming needs.

Special educators put an excessive amount of time into learning how to teach online in a short amount of time. Special educators approached the beginning of the health pandemic with little knowledge of instructional technology; however, they learned to work with new digital

platforms and navigate new online programs within three months. They increased their knowledge and skills in the 2020 – 2021 school year by teaching within fully online, hybrid, and co-located models. SpEdTs persisted in their work, even when faced with the most challenging and stressful conditions due to their enduring care of their students and families. This care within a pandemic created a work culture of extreme workloads and an extra-ordinary use of time.

The inter-related aspects of the individual, the work, and the work culture can form a positive synergy within an organization. Within a special education system, positive organizational synergy impacts individual student growth and represents accountability to the unique goals for each student outlined on their individualized educational program (IEP). Vivian and Hormann (2013) also contend that the intensity resulting from the organizational trio can also be harmful, influencing trauma within the organization and ultimately impacting the individuals within the organization (p.7). In the next section, I discuss further organizational trauma to explain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of special educators.

Organizations Can be Traumatized

It may appear bold to state that the COVID-19 health pandemic also traumatized the educational system. However, multiple aspects of the organizational trio were impacted by the COVID-19 health pandemic. The examples provided in Table 7.1 demonstrate shifts in schools due to health pandemic guidelines and restrictions from the perspective of the individual teacher. The examples are not exhaustive. These are simply examples provided by special educators regarding the implications for their school due to COVID-19.

Table 7.1

Examples of COVID-19 Impact on the Organization

Work Culture (Policies, Procedures, Systems)	The Work (Teaching and Professional Responsibilities)	The Individual (Educators)
Mandated distance learning	<p>Developed new skills to teach online</p> <p>Held meetings and maintained collegial relationships in virtual meeting spaces or through digital means (e.g., email, text messaging)</p>	<p>Taught from home while navigating family responsibilities and personal/familial health</p> <p>Adjusted the instructional schedule and methods to accommodate families and student access to technology</p> <p>Adjusted the work routine when mandated to teach only on a distance learning model</p>
Safety policies for social distancing in the school and wearing mask/shields	<p>Taught and remained in designated pod or classroom to reduce movement and more difficult contact tracing</p> <p>Met with colleagues virtually for professional teaming, meetings or learning activities</p> <p>Met with parents virtually or communicated over the phone or email</p>	<p>Taught with a face covering and developed classroom norms for face coverings</p> <p>Taught smaller class size and/or taught students on a limited face-to-face schedule supplementing online work when students were not present in the school.</p>
District policies for COVID-19 testing	<p>Contacted families to provide any updates or programmatic changes due to students or self, diagnosed with COVID-19</p> <p>Covered for other teachers when they were sick, and a substitute teacher was not available or assigned</p>	<p>Followed the requirements and timelines set forth by the district for testing when displaying any number of symptoms related to COVID-19</p> <p>Taught from home when waiting for test result or when testing positive for COVID-19</p>

Multiple models for instruction and schedules for instruction (fully online, hybrid, face-to-face)

Taught students face-to-face using different models and schedules to reduce class size and allow for social distancing in the classroom

Changed teaching models multiple times throughout the school year.

Taught fully online

Adjusted and re-adjusted schedules, curriculum, and instruction in response to the multiple transitions throughout the school year.

Taught co-located (simultaneous face-to-face and synchronous online instruction)

Learned to use new forms of instructional technology and equipment

Communicated with families to promote school attendance

Primarily taught alone

The onset of COVID-19 may be an example of a single event creating trauma for an organization. However, Vivian and Hormann postulate that organizational trauma is not limited to solely a single event. An organization may feel the effects of trauma in a more subtle cumulative fashion. In the next section, I explain the impact of COVID-19 considering the possibility of cumulative trauma given the repeated changes and shifts in the work of special educators.

Cumulative Trauma and the Work of Special Educators

Given my former premise that the COVID-19 health pandemic created organizational trauma to the educational system (outlined in Table 7.1), I draw from the work of Vivian and Hormann and use their concept of cumulative organizational trauma to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the work of special educators. Incorporating the past work of seminal researchers (Kahn 2005; Stein 2004; Volkan 2003), Vivian and Hormann posited a more nuanced stance of organizational trauma to support a systemic approach in organizational resiliency. They suggest a change within the work-culture relationship as necessary for organization longevity. This systemic perspective emphasizes organizational change rather than primarily blaming the individual or suggesting the individual is solely responsible for their work stress or trauma. In other words, a better functioning organization creates a work culture where individuals can thrive professionally.

The continuous changes in educational programming from the onset of the health pandemic and through the following year manifested as a repeated pattern of uncertainty and change. The programmatic changes were significant. Initially, educational programming shifted from normalized brick and mortar classroom instruction to a newly designed distance learning model. Distance learning disconnected teachers and students from their learning communities,

relying on fully online methods or deliverable paper packets for instruction. Although special educators accepted the situation, many shared their inability to connect with all students and families. As the health pandemic continued into the following school year, students returned to the school or attended remotely in a fully online program, given family preference. Regardless of the program choice, the schedule and instructional routine were different. Most students experienced less instruction than usual throughout the fall and winter. The rising COVID-19 cases throughout the state in the fall abruptly interrupted educational programming, and the state forced schools to shift to distance learning. From mid-January through the remainder of the school year, the availability of a face-to-face classroom option depended on the program, age of student, or school local. Due to health concerns or other family considerations, many students did not assume instruction in their school and continued to attend remotely for the entire school year.

This repeated exposure to changes in educational programming in response to strict COVID-19 health measures suggests cumulative organizational trauma. However, an assumption that every individual was traumatized is grandiose. Instead, I suggest that certain individuals within the organization may be more vulnerable to trauma due to their work or the work culture. In addition, the very underlying values of the individual who is attracted to the profession may place them in a susceptible position. The unique demands during COVID-19 put special educators at an increased risk of experiencing trauma due to the interplay within the *dynamic organizational trio*. This volley between examining the relationship between and across the trio (individual, the work, and the work culture) is intentional to understand patterns, processes, and policies within an organization or system that can produce positive synergy or less productive or

traumatic experiences for special educators. In the next section, I describe why special educators were more susceptible to trauma during the health pandemic.

Symptoms of Cumulative Organizational Trauma and Impact on the Special Educator

The special education system dictates policies, procedures, and processes to abide by the legal requirements and accountability for specialized programming. Student-centered or individualized programming is the primary work of a special educator. During the pandemic, much of the work changed. In chapter six, I shared case studies of four special educators. Although they taught in similar programs, their experiences navigating the health pandemic were very different. However, they revealed similarities within their stories resembling cumulative organizational trauma.

Vivian and Hormann developed a framework to demonstrate how organizational trauma resembles clinical or individual trauma. Within this framework, they identified a variety of specific characteristics an individual may develop when traumatized. They applied the features to reveal an organizational perspective of trauma. I identified three indicators of organizational trauma resembling the ideas from this framework to analyze the experiences of the featured special educators. These descriptions of trauma act as a diagnosis to inform organizations of necessary systemic change and recovery.

Cumulative Trauma Baked into Organizational Culture

In the previous section, I shared how an individual or a special educator may develop secondary traumatic stress because of their underlying value in caring for others. From a systemic or organizational perspective, this cumulative trauma becomes established in the work culture resulting in a hidden understanding that caring for others over oneself as a natural part of the work. This unrealistic expectation creates a revolving door of special educators entering the

field and leaving due to stress and burnout. Individual who can't hack the demands of the work, are considered not tough enough for the work of a special educator. Viewing trauma from an organizational perspective, we understand better how the system could establish more effective resources and support for newer teachers allowing a more gradual release and increase of responsibilities as they acclimate to the profession. Guidance from more experienced teachers or a mentor should include the modeling and support to the newer teacher on setting realistic professional norms while developing more efficient work management skills. Again, the work culture impacts the individual. By identifying trauma from an organizational perspective, we can identify dysfunctional patterns within the system requiring change or restructuring.

A Required Hypervigilance in Paperwork and Documentation

Just an individual may become hypervigilant and feel unsafe due to a traumatic experience causing harm or casualty; special educators were required to be excessive in their attention to paperwork and documentation. Special educators would describe the required IEP documentation during the pandemic as extreme. This excessive documentation was needed to ensure thorough documentation to avoid litigation. Paperwork was revised and re-revised multiple times throughout pandemic programming to record any change or suspected change outlined in student IEPs or the renamed form called a Contingency Learning Plan (CLP).

Documentation and accountability to a students' IEP is very typical work of a special educator. Using the input of the student IEP team, the IEP is revised annually. However, districts required special educators to change CLPs at least two or more times throughout the year during the pandemic. They were also required to document program options even if the parent or guardian didn't want that option. For example, a CLP for families preferring fully online programming would also have services for face-to-face instruction documented as a service

option. Typically, options discussed by a team are summarized and recorded, but the alternatives are not outlined in the IEP. This time-consuming paperwork and the increased instructional work during the pandemic resulted in difficulty managing and coping with the work. Special educators needed planning time to complete this work. Many were denied this resource due to the high demand in instructional scheduling and required student contact time. Again, SpEdTs were at risk of high levels of stress, burnout, or other cumulative trauma symptoms due to the extraordinary workload.

Narrow Relationships and Isolation

A traumatized individual may limit relationships and activities with others to reduce anxiety. Given the COVID-19 guidelines, teachers and students needed to restrict their movement in the school building to minimize the possible spread of the disease. This restriction impacted special education programming and access to inclusive classroom settings. Students with more significant disabilities receive special education services in the special education classroom for most of the school day; therefore, many students could not leave their special education space. Many students only engaged in general education learning activities when their grade level teacher provided online instruction. Students with more significant special education need remained in self-contained classrooms for most of the school year, engaging solely with the same small subset of peers.

Since students were not leaving the classroom, SpEdTs were responsible for the students the entire time they were in school. This constant student contact time contributed to losing time for other professional responsibilities, including legal processes, paperwork, and collegial teaming. Special educators reported on their isolation from others when teaching in the school

and fully online instruction. This isolation was difficult, led to poor work morale, and reduced levels of energy.

Organizational Patterns

Patterns, including artifacts, adopted values, and underlying assumptions compose an organizational culture in both explicit and implicit ways (Vivian & Hormann, 2013). Artifacts such as written mission statements, strategic goals, or other similar documentation directly represent an organization's purpose or values. However, the values expressed as scribed may not be adopted in practice, presenting discrepancies in what the organization states and how individuals behave. These differences produce ambiguity within the work culture. Furthermore, underlying assumptions or implicit beliefs within the work environment require assimilation for anyone new to the organization. A system of hidden rules is maintained because a subset of individuals within the work environment withholds the tradition of the concealed culture. Those who are unable to assimilate may experience a systemized oppression and eventually leave (or are rejected) due to the misfit of the individual with the work culture. Repeated patterns within the culture can impact the organization negatively by developing a perpetual difficulty in retaining employees. However, practices within the work culture aligned with the values of the organization can produce positive outcomes. These patterns are also worth recognizing, for these routines, behaviors, and dispositions should be affirmed and systematized to maintain teacher retention.

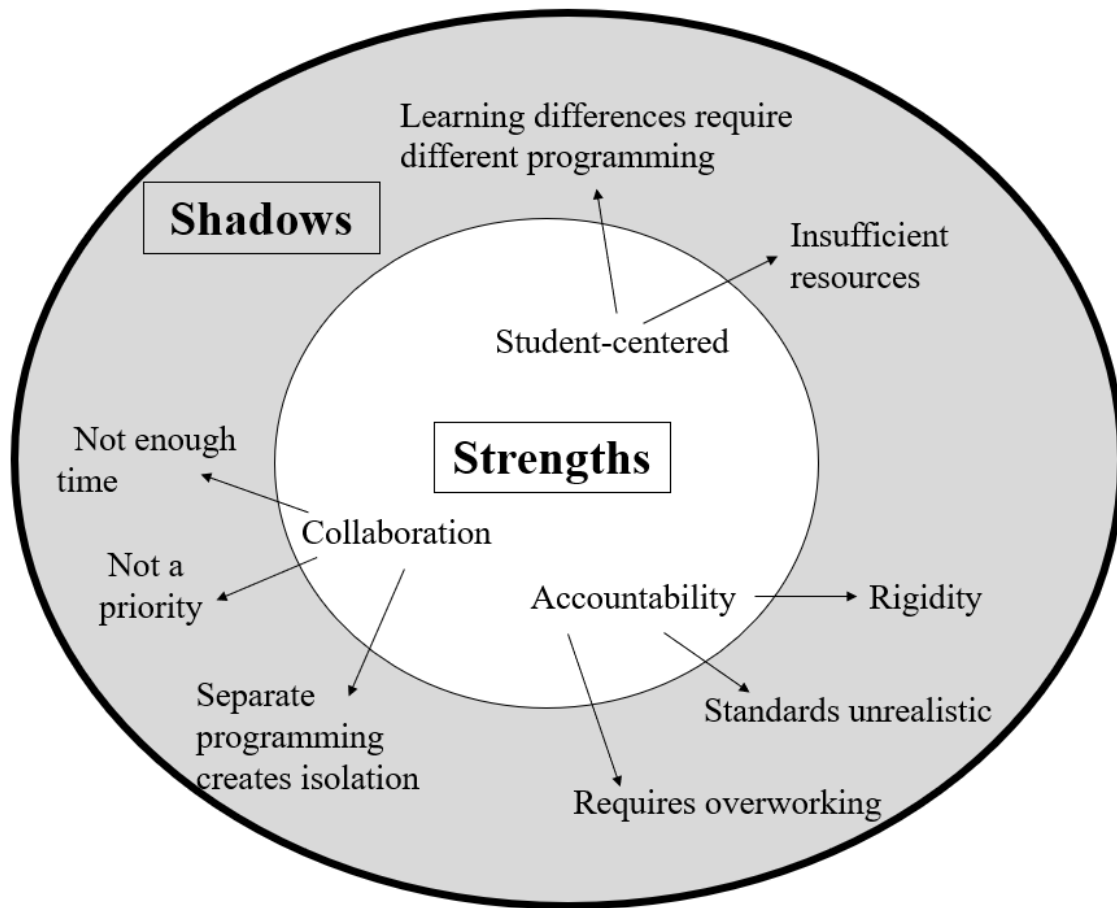
Patterns within the work culture are worthy of attention for they help describe an organization's culture (Vivian & Hormann, 2013). Using this systemic perspective, an organization can better understand the work culture to identify the patterns that positively impact organization values and those worthy of change. Vivian and Hormann suggest a collective

examination using a Strengths and Shadows Model (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Vivian & Hormann 2012). This organizational process promotes a unifying awareness of the work culture and an invitation for change or reconstruction for damaging patterns within the systematized culture.

Each of the four special educators featured in the chapter six case studies shared different pandemic experiences because of their school cultures. However, similar patterns emerged through their stories. The Strengths and Shadows Model presented in Figure 7.2 represents the special education system and the experiences of the featured educators and their pandemic work culture.

Figure 7.2

Strengths and Shadows Model: Special Education System During the Health Pandemic



To begin, start with the strengths of the organization. Strengths provided in the example include the vital elements of the special education system. These are the values or capacities supporting the systems' mission to provide specialized programming. Then, identify the shadows associated with each strength. Shadows represent undisclosed or hidden elements generating misalignment in the work culture and the values of the system. The shadows identified emphasize the experiences of the four featured special educators.

A strength of the special education system is its student-centered approach. The student is the focus when designing specialized instruction and programming. The individual learning profile of each student guides the instructional cycle of planning, teaching, and assessment to achieve identified learning outcomes. Instruction requires specialization, modification, or adaptation to the general curriculum. In addition, specialized programming includes intervention in other domains such as communication, social, or behavior. The demands of implementing student-centered instruction were enormous during the pandemic and, for some students, unrealistic. Special educators spent an excessive amount of time adapting and differentiating online instruction to meet the specific needs of their learners. Given the characteristics of a student's disability, SpEdTs needed to support student access and use of technology using alternative methods or by relying on the support of a parent or caregiver. These obstacles became barriers for many students, especially students with more complex learning needs. Many students were not able to access or fully engage in online instruction. Families were placed in difficult positions when opting in for fully online instruction due to apparent health risks. Back-to-back online and face-to-face instructional schedules during the pandemic were necessary without the provision of adequate resources of personnel or time.

There was tremendous difficulty providing adequate services for students during the pandemic. This inability to provide the required services directly contradicted another strength in the special education system. Accountability to the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) is both the legal and professional work of the SpEdT. However, providing the standard service minutes or all of the necessary services was unrealistic given the multiple changes in program models. The systems' rigidity placed SpEdTs in the position to revise and re-revise documentation informing the parent of relevant and irrelevant options. Excessive requests for parent approval were also required. This extreme documentation led to special educators overworking as they attempted to meet unrealistic accountability standards.

Special educators need to collaborate with IEP team members in an ongoing fashion. In some cases, SpEdTs also collaborate with agencies outside of the district. Although collaboration is a highly valued strength of the special education system, meeting with others receives low priority in school schedules. The necessary instructional scheduling to accommodate student services takes precedent over planning or teaming time. Pandemic programming exasperated the problem. Special educators were isolated from others due to excessive instructional schedules, restrictions for remaining in classroom spaces, or fully online instruction. Teachers who found ways to connect with colleagues had more ease in coping with pandemic programming. If an immediate colleague was not accessible, SpEdTs reached outside of their school for connection. Collegial support was a necessary means to cope with the work.

The strengths and shadows model provides a process for schools, districts, teams, or departments to examine the implications of cumulative trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first step for healing is to understand the reality of the health pandemic phenomenon. Listening to one another creates an opportunity to re-ground as a learning

community and move forward in a valuing and resourceful fashion. A systemic understanding of the shared experience creates hope, stimulates reimagination, and promotes organizational resiliency.

Summary

Special educators faced significant changes in their work when shifting from standard programming to pandemic programming. They withstood complex challenges with enduring care for their students and their families. This ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) may be what called them to the profession. However, their care may have also placed special educators in a susceptible position for overworking to meet the needs of their students and families. In addition, the very organizations they work for may have created negative patterns in the interplay of the organizational culture and the work.

In this chapter, I used a systemic stance to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way special educators provided special education services. Using the concept of cumulative organizational trauma (Vivian & Hormann 2013), I examined the dynamic organizational trio of the individual, the work culture, and the work within pandemic conditions. By extending our understanding beyond the individual to the system, a Strengths and Shadows Model (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Vivian & Hormann 2012) was used to illustrate both the assets and barriers of the comprehensive special education system. This working model can support schools or districts to celebrate and reinforce functional patterns and reconstruct dysfunctional systems within the organization. Ultimately, the aim is to enhance organizational resiliency through the resourcefulness of its members.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The practice of teaching within the strict public health guidelines of the COVID-19 disease was undefined as the deadly virus spread worldwide in 2020. In March, schools in MN shifted to a novel model of instruction defined as distance learning. Regardless of the enormous changes to work and family lifestyle, participants in the first phase of this research study navigated their work, accepting the conditions even when uncertain of the future. In phase two of the study, I examined the phenomenon more closely. The reflections of special education teachers (SpEdTs) on their ability to provide specialized services during the onset of the pandemic revealed more information. Special educators reported on the need to quickly adjust instruction to an online format, revise instructional schedules to accommodate a distance learning model, and alter processes to uphold the legal requirements for specialized programming. Distance learning programming was especially concerning for young children and students with more complex disabilities. Fully online instruction was not always a useful instructional format due to student unique learning profiles or the inability to independently access the technology. COVID-19 placed educational programming in a state of pandemic programming throughout the following school year. For nine more months, schools functioned in a continuous state of reaction while abiding by changing health and safety requirements issued at local and state levels. The number of COVID-19 cases within the local county dictated models for instruction in MN schools. In phase three of the study, I learned from four educators teaching students with more significant disabilities that these extraordinary times required extra-ordinary work.

This study aimed to examine the multiple factors impacting special educators' work as they confront unprecedented circumstances in delivering specialized services to their students.

The intended outcome was to identify new learning to enhance the work of special education teachers (SpEdTs). In this chapter, I revisit the intentions of the study and provide a summary of the findings and future implications for research. Next, I propose recommendations by synthesizing the overall findings using the organizational trauma work of Vivian and Hormann (2013) and Noddings' (1984) ethic of care.

Summary and Implications for Future Research

I began my study with this inquiry: How did SpEdTs describe the impact of the Coronavirus Disease -19 (COVID-19) health pandemic on the way they provide special education services? The purpose of this study was fourfold: (1) To identify effective methods in using a variety of equitable instructional technologies across multiple learning environments; (2) To identify effective methods for interacting and collaborating with families and integrate these practices into the professional work of teachers; (3) To identify approaches in managing and coping with the complex work of an educator; and (4) To identify the resources to develop new skills, learn from one another, and support one another within vibrant learning school communities. In this section, I summarize the findings and suggest future research implications.

Equitable Instructional Technologies Across Multiple Learning Environments

Special educators spent endless hours learning new technologies at the onset of the COVID-19 health pandemic to develop online instruction for their learners. They developed a multitude of new skills, including asynchronous and synchronous approaches. Educators learned to use new virtual platforms to deliver synchronous instruction (e.g., WebEx, Zoom), multiple programs supporting asynchronous instruction (e.g., Seesaw), and interactive online programs (e.g., Peardeck). In addition to the rapid development of new skills, SpEdTs also needed to adapt online instruction to meet the learning needs of their students. Most programs offering a menu of

predeveloped lessons or online curriculums weren't appropriate for specialized instruction.

Special educators needed to adapt and differentiate online instruction for their students to access and engage in the learning activities. SpEdTs confronted tremendous barriers for some learners in accessing online instruction. This difficulty was especially apparent for learners with more complex needs.

Special educators applied their new online instruction skills within their special education classrooms the following school year. Online programs and instruction supplemented face-to-face instruction when strict health guidelines prohibited close contact among individuals and shared materials among learners. Special educators increased their online skills with minimal or no training when combining online and face-to-face instruction in the co-located special education classroom. Some students were able to attend general education classes synchronously. This online option provided some engagement with grade-level content and peers. During the 2020 – 2021 school year, students choosing instruction at their school could not move from classroom to classroom. Unfortunately, this option was not available to all students in separate special education classrooms; therefore, decreasing or, in some cases eliminating inclusive education programming.

More research is needed to examine differentiated instruction for students requiring intensive intervention while using online or digital instructional technologies. The usefulness of specialized online instruction for students across the severity of disability requires further inquiry by examining alternative formats for online teaching or approaches in place of online instruction even when needing to teach from a distance. Continued research is needed to develop more effective online technologies for students with special education needs, especially students with

more complex learning needs. Advancements in technology are necessary to support students to independently access, engage, and develop both learning and life outcomes.

Effective Methods for Interacting and Collaborating with Families

Special education teachers deepened relationships with many families because of the shared experience of the health pandemic. Educators and parents faced the challenges together, attending to the mutual goal of continuing special education services for the student regardless of the conditions. Special educators used multiple modes of communication with parents (e.g., virtual spaces, email, phone, text messaging). The novel method of virtual meeting spaces introduced at the onset of the pandemic was the only meeting space for teachers and parents throughout the following school year. Special educators spoke of the continued benefit of offering a virtual meeting space to parents beyond the health pandemic to reduce attendance barriers, including transportation needs or busy work schedules.

The frequency of communication was unequal across families. Given the differences in family lifestyle, the severity of a disability, or parental support needs, the amount of communication varied. For some students, SpEdTs communicated with the parent every day or multiple times throughout the week. In other cases, SpEdTs had difficulty reaching a parent. Faced with this difficulty, special educators collaborated with other team members to not inundate parents with too much communication. Most reported that a prior trusting relationship with parents before COVID-19 was helpful in their continued work with the parent during the pandemic.

When distance learning began in spring 2020, special education teachers reported a release of their teaching role to parents. They spoke of how they consulted parents on how to support and teach academic and non-academic areas. Parent or family support was especially

needed when programming for young children, elementary-age students, and students with more significant disabilities. Secondary level SpEdTs interacted with their students through texting or email with greater frequency than when teaching face-to-face. When teaching from a distance, SpEdTs needed to develop virtual or digital approaches to communicate with parents and students to encourage student access and engagement of online instruction.

Special education teachers across all age levels reported the need to set up management systems for students and their parents for online instructional schedules. Special educators reported spending a lot of their time connecting with parents or students about the online instructional schedule. Still, some students continued to have difficulty attending on a routine basis. Continuous shifts in programming due to health restriction altered routines and family schedules, lifestyles, and economic differences presented barriers for students to access online instruction. Most commonly reported was the dependency on parents to support younger students or students with more significant disabilities who were still developing skills to independently access and engage in online instruction.

More research is needed to identify effective ways to support teacher and parent communication and develop trusting relationships. Differences in family culture, race, and economic capital between educator and parent impacts communication and interaction styles. More information on how to connect effectively with each parent and family is needed. In addition, school communities need a better understanding of the resources required to enhance parent engagement and the creativity to meet those needs.

Managing and Coping with the Complex Work of an Educator

It would be too simplistic to state that the health pandemic phenomenon presented unique conditions for special educators. Prior research attests to the difficulty SpEdTs had in managing

the workload (Morvant et al., 1995; Bettini et al., 2017; Bettini et al., 2017; Samuels, 2018). Benjamin and Black (2012) reported that the setting for novice special educators is high risk and trauma-producing. SpEdTs leave the profession due to stress, lack of administrative support, large workloads, dissatisfaction, lack of understanding of the role, and variability of support in mentoring and induction (Billingsley et al., 2004; Hagaman & Casey, 2017; Whitaker, 2000). However, findings from this study indicate an extreme increase in the workload for special educators during the health pandemic. They needed to learn and adapt new instructional technologies, communicate with parents and students, and revise on multiple occasions each student pandemic IEP due to school closures and strict health guidelines. The unprecedented demands of teaching during COVID-19 may have placed SpEdTs at an increased risk of experiencing high stress levels.

The most apparent difference in the work of special educators compared to their general education peers was evident in the increased paperwork demands. The rigidity of the special education system did not accommodate the shifts and turns of pandemic programming. Most districts redesigned Individual Education Program (IEP) forms to reflect multiple options for special education programming. District administration directed special educators to revise and document changes in programming every time there was a change in pandemic programming. In one district, special educators were required to document the services and instructional plan implemented every instructional hour for every student during the last three months of school.

At the onset of the pandemic, most special educators accepted the pandemic. Accepting “the reality of a situation” is a characteristic of resiliency (Hormann, 2018, p.94). Acceptance invites optimism and the grit to stick with the challenges and construct new possibilities. However, given the ongoing changes and increased workload throughout the pandemic, most

participants reported tremendous difficulty coping with the situation. Special educators reported on their isolation from others, loss of routine, and the inability to complete their required work within the workday boundaries and workweek. These caring educators were at high risk for the cumulative trauma occurring within their schools and the special education system as they attempted to navigate pandemic conditions.

A systemic standpoint is required to examine the work culture for special educators. Current practices emphasize how the individual special educator can cope with the demands of the profession. Although this self-care is beneficial, focusing only on what the individual can do deflects from the overall work culture and ineffective patterns within the system influencing the problem. Research is needed to understand better how changes within the system or school organization can positively impact the work of a special educator. A collective acceptance is required to face reality, find meaning and reconstruct special educational programming.

Resources Special Educators Need to Develop New Skills and Learn from One Another

Collegial support was a necessary ingredient to make do and manage pandemic conditions. From the onset of the pandemic and throughout the following school year, special educators reported that their immediate colleagues were the best resource for navigating the pandemic. With collegial support, special educators were resourceful in combatting barriers and coping with the demands. With the help of a collegial friend, they learned new skills, navigated problems, and managed their fears. In a personal Zoom conversation with Shana Hormann, she stated, “It’s all about connection” (S. Hormann, personal communication, July 7, 2021). Special educators needed connections with others. When they could not interact with colleagues within their school, they exercised leadership and ingenuity by changing their instructional schedule to accommodate proximity or reaching out to other colleagues through professional development

activities in their district or statewide initiatives. Special educators reported a need for connecting with others to share experiences and listen to one another. These shared experiences with colleagues supported special educators to tolerate the pandemic and adapt practices in special education programming.

Unfortunately, special educators reported less time routinely available during pandemic programming to collaborate with others. More research is required to understand better how schools can use resources effectively to allow teaming time for special educators. More effective models are needed to organize available staffing or alternative resources to provide time for routine professional teaming. Again, a more systemic approach in facing the reality of the special educators' work culture is required. This pattern of not prioritizing necessary time to collaborate and team with others is detrimental to the work of a special educator and their ability to cope with the work.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I suggest using a more comprehensive or systemic approach to solving the problem. I hope that my research contributes to the field of education and promotes necessary changes to decrease the special education teacher shortage and impact long-lasting outcomes for our teachers and their students.

My recommendations propose an organizational stance for reimagining and restructuring systems to enhance special education teacher retention and student learning outcomes. In chapter seven, I described the strengths of the special education system and the damaging systemic patterns or shadows baked within the work culture during the health pandemic. I presented the analysis using a Strengths and Shadows Model (Vivian & Hormann 2013; see also Hormann 2018; Vivian & Hormann 2012). This collaborative process promotes a unifying awareness of

the strengths or mission of the organization and invites the reconstruction of damaging systemic patterns or shadows.

The rigidity of the special education system did not accommodate the shifts and turns of pandemic programming placing special educators at risk for cumulative trauma. Special educators reported isolation from others, loss of routine, and the inability to complete their required work within the workday boundaries and workweek. Special educators also lacked the resources of time, personnel, and professional development to readjust online instruction to meet the differentiated needs of their learners. Lastly, the health pandemic restrictions and extraordinary workload presented obstacles for teachers to work together and support one another. This lack of connection increased stress and was trauma-producing for special educators, regardless of their experience or years of teaching.

The repair and healing of an organization are both sensitive and collective. As individuals begin to envision a new way of functioning, leaders need to instill hope by responding to the call and sharing leadership with others. The individuals who represent and live the work culture should be empowered to identify new ways to work together to further the organization's mission. Shared leadership instills both power and control in the situation, supports resourcefulness, and continued momentum for change. Resilient organizations understand the existing condition, direct the desired change, and take collective responsibility in the change process.

I recommend three key areas of development: (1) Take Collective Responsibility; (2) Share Leadership with Others; and (3) Develop Resilient and Caring Support Systems. These recommendations are suggested to enhance the larger educational system to promote effective special education programming and increase retention of educators who are drawn to the work.

Take Collective Responsibility

Bringing together individuals to discuss the phenomenon and understand the implications for the teaching profession and our students is the first step in healing from the possible cumulative trauma and stress of COVID-19. Just as individuals need to face the traumatic situation to let go, determine the next steps, and solicit support, organization and systems also need to engage in the healing work. Large systems like districts and schools and subsystems like departments or teams require this collective work as we move forward. This connection is required to process the phenomenon and reconstruct a healthy organization and its work culture patterns. As a result, organizations, departments, or teams enhance collegial relationships and create a safe base for learning and support as they embark on their work together.

Collective responsibility also requires collaboration across systems. For example, partnerships across teacher preparation programs and local school districts are needed to process the phenomenon and determine how to prepare and reattain teachers. Combining resources across systems enlarges the view and understanding of the situation and creates the opportunity for new insight and integrated resources. Again, connection supports an empathic understanding of the situation and promotes authentic change.

Share Leadership with Others

Facing reality requires a willingness of caring leaders to provide a platform for dialogue with others. A history of stuffing down issues or trauma without open discussion creates a less trusting work culture. Furthermore, the organization continues to carry the cumulative trauma. By avoiding the situation, the organization assumes the impact of the trauma in other ways. Stressed-out employees or repetitive teacher turnover is one example of how an organization manifests its trauma.

Preparing the platform for dialogue requires some level of trust among individuals and the leadership of the organization. Caring leaders need to facilitate the collective discussion by inviting openness to listen empathically to one another. Understanding the situation requires collective voices. Keeping the dialogue on ineffective patterns within the work culture may promote less blame on the individual and more directed on the work and the relationship to the work culture.

Moving forward to reshape the work culture requires shared leadership. Strategic planning or action planning is a normal process for most organizations. However, a course of action for the repair and healing of an organization is both sensitive and collective. As individuals begin to envision a new way of functioning, leaders need to instill hope by responding to the call. This work is sensitive; for the collective group, determine the next steps. Identifying new ways to work together and complete the required outcome should be determined by the culture's individuals. Shared leadership instills both power and control in the situation, supports resourcefulness, and continued momentum for change. Resilient organizations evolve by responding to the change process sensitively and collectively. They understand the existing condition, direct the desired change, and take collective responsibility in the change process.

Develop Resilient and Caring Support Systems

The final recommendation in restructuring systems refers to the ongoing maintenance of a resilient system. Resilient systems are responsive to change or intervention because they have developed caring support systems. As members engage in change, they navigate new habits, establish new patterns, and revise attitudes because of their work together. Just as special educators expressed some level of comfort knowing their colleagues were in the same boat with them during the health pandemic, sharing the boat in the change process is essential. Work

culture changes because teachers share the experience. Although this relational experience can be comforting, accountability to one another within the change process is necessary to guide the boat in the preferred direction. Safety and support are also needed to ensure all passengers in the boat have the floatation devices required in high winds. Frankly, collegial support in the change process supports new learning and reduces stress.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. One limitation of this study is the lack of information from participants who may have felt more overwhelmed with distance learning or SpEdTs newer to the field. Participants self-volunteered to complete the initial survey in phase one of the study. Perhaps those special educators who were feeling more successful at the health pandemic onset volunteered to participate in the survey. Their willingness to complete another task demonstrates some ability to manage their work with some sense of confidence or flexibility. Furthermore, some phase one participants also volunteered for the phase two interviews. This smaller subset of participants was willing to engage in the interviews and take the time to reflect on their pandemic experience. The four participants selected for ongoing data collection throughout the 2020 – 2021 school year represent a smaller subset of phase two participants. One may assume that their willingness to engage in the additional work as a phase three participant (e.g., three more interviews, monthly documentation and logging, review of transcripts and analysis) also demonstrates confidence in their capabilities and resiliency. The findings in this study may be limited given this original pool of volunteer participants. However, findings may convey information from SpEdTs who can flexibly navigate their work and have stood the test of time to persist and respond effectively to the demands of their work.

Another limitation in phase three of the study was the narrow examination of pandemic programming in only one special education setting. The deeper inquiry into special education programming in special education center-based or self-contained classrooms was intentional given the unique characteristics of online programming for students with more significant disabilities. However, readers should review the findings cautiously. The conclusions of the year-long data collection were limited to the experiences of four special educators in center-based programming. Therefore, restricting generalization across all levels of special education programming.

Closing Comment from the Author

As I close this last chapter of my dissertation, I celebrate almost forty years as an educator. My identity as a special educator and my enduring care of the field permeates my work. Perhaps this dedication to the profession is seen as an additional limitation to the study. I hope not. I assume researchers pursue the inquiry due to an intense interest or a desire to solve a pervasive problem of practice. Retaining special educators is a prevalent and ongoing problem in the field of education. I hope that this study contributes to the solution and enhances ideas for addressing the issue more systemically.

I have been around long enough to see a lot of twists and turns in education. The COVID-19 health pandemic was unexpected, but perhaps the phenomenon jolted the educational system sufficiently to stimulate positive restructuring as we take our next steps into the future. I hope this study opens new doors for educators to come together and lead in the evolution of educational programming.

Move forward in support of one another and teach with care.

--Laura Medwetz

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: CITI Certificate



Completion Date 17-Dec-2019
 Expiration Date 16-Dec-2023
 Record ID 34577671

This is to certify that:

Laura Medwetz

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Subjects Research (HSR)
Human Subjects Research Training: Social-Behavioral-Educational
Researchers
1 - Basic Course

(Curriculum Group)
 (Course Learner Group)
 (Stage)



Under requirements set by:

University of St. Thomas - Minnesota

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w865619a3-653d-4575-a379-58877f36c003-34577671

Appendix 2: IRB Approval



Date: April 22, 2020

To: Laura Medwetz

From: Sarah Muenster-Blakley, Institutional Review Board

Project Title: [[1596347-1] 2020 Pandemic: Impact on the Role of the Special Education Teacher

Reference: New Project

Action: Project Approved

Approval Date: April 22, 2020

Expiration: April 21, 2021

Dear Laura:

I have reviewed your protocol and approved your project as reflected in the application that you submitted. Please note that all research conducted with this project title must be done in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and assurance that the project is understood by the participants and their signing of the approved consent form. The informed consent process must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between you and your research participants. Federal law requires that each person participating in this study receive a copy of the consent form. All original records relating to participant consent must be retained for a minimum of three years upon completion of the project.

Amendments to targeted participants, risk level, recruitment, research procedures, or the consent process as approved by the IRB must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementing changes to the research study. No changes may be made without IRB approval *except* to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant.

Any problems involving project participants or others must be reported to the IRB within one (1) business day of the principal investigator's knowledge of the problem. A problem reporting form is available in the IRBNet Document Library or on the IRB website and should be submitted to muen0526@stthomas.edu. Any non-compliance or complaints relating to the project must be reported immediately.

Approval to work with human participants with this project will expire on **April 21, 2021**. Please direct questions at any time to Sarah Muenster-Blakley at (651) 962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu. I wish you success with your project!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Muenster-Blakley".

Sarah Muenster-Blakley, M.A., CIP
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix 3: Phase One – Survey Consent



1596347-1 2020 Pandemic: Impact of the Role of the Special Education Teacher Survey Consent

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the role of the special education teacher (e.g., instruction and due process requirements) and their ability to adapt/cope during the “stay at home order” due to COVID-19, Spring 2020. To volunteer to be a participant, you must be a Special Education Teacher currently teaching with a provisional/temporary license (e.g., MN Tier 2) or full license (e.g., MN Tier 3 or 4).

This study is being conducted by Laura Medwetz, MS and Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan, PhD, Department of Special Education, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

If you agree to participate, we will ask you to voluntarily answer several survey questions focused on your responsibilities in providing special education services during COVID-19 “face to face” school closures and your response to adapting and coping with your teaching role during that time. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

We will also be asking individuals to voluntarily participate in a longer interview (approximately one hour). If you are interested in participating in the longer interviews, please email Laura Medwetz at lmedwetz@stthomas.edu or provide your name and contact information on the last survey item.

The study has risks. Given the stressors on personal, family, or employment changes due to COVID-19, participants could experience possible emotional distress and/or recalling traumatic or distressing events. Participants can opt out of completing the survey and not participate in the study. Additional reminders or correspondence to complete the survey will not be provided. Participants will self-volunteer to complete the interview. Participant names will remain confidential in the survey and interview results. A summary of interview responses will be shared with the participant to ensure accuracy of information shared and the opportunity to omit specific information previously provided via the interview.

In order to gather information on how special education teachers adapted to changes in their role and coped with those changes, participants will be asked to reflect on personal and job related information and resources in both the survey and the interview, probing for personal or sensitive information. To anticipate and minimize risk factors, the initial survey is confidential and optional. Survey questions attending to adapting or coping include an option of "skip response". Participants selected for the interview will self-volunteer information or responses. A summary of interview responses will be shared with the participant to ensure accuracy of information shared and the opportunity to omit specific information previously provided via the interview.

There are no direct benefits for participating in the study.

The records of this survey will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until the survey is submitted. You may withdraw by closing the survey on your computer. You are also free to skip any questions I ask.

You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the survey by contacting the researcher. You may contact Laura Medwetz at: lmedwetz@stthomas.edu or Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan at lstansberry@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at (651) 962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

By clicking “Agree,” I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

Please print this form to keep for your records.

Appendix 4: Phase One Survey Questions**SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PANDEMIC SURVEY****2020 Pandemic: Impact on the Role of the Special Education Teacher****IRB Net Tracking #: 1596347-1**

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PANDEMIC SURVEY**Identifying Information****1. Gender**

- Female
- Male
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Other
- Skip Response

2. Age

- 20 and 30 years of age,
- 31- 40 year of age,
- 41-50 years of age,
- 51- 60 years of age,
- 61-65 years of age,
- Skip Response

3. Are you a Licensed Special Education Teacher of Record

- Yes
- No

a. **Yes. A Provisionally Licensed Special Education Teacher of Record (e.g., MN Tier II)** If yes, How many years of teaching? (0-1 years, 2-3 years, 4- 5 years, 6 – 9 years, 10 or more years)

b. **Yes. A Fully Licensed Special Education Teacher of Record (e.g., Tier 3 or 4)** If yes, How many years of teaching? (0-1 years, 2-3 years, 4- 5 years, 6 – 9 years, 10 or more years)

c. No. You are not eligible to complete the survey.

4. What was the approximate date that you last had face to face (in-person) contact with your students?

- March 6th
- March 13th,
- March 20th,
- March 27th,
- April 3rd

5. What population of students do you teach?

- Mild to moderate disabilities
- Moderate to severe disabilities
- Severe to profound disabilities

6. What is the age group of your caseload (instructional class list)?

- Birth to 3, 3 – 5 years
- Primary Elementary
- Intermediate Elementary
- Middle School, Highschool
- Transition level

7. Where is your school located?

- City
- Suburb
- Town
- Rural
- Other _____

Distance or On-line Experience**8. Rate your level of skill and comfort with using instructional technology prior to the COVID-19 pandemic school closing.**

- Beginner - used at least one instructional technology in my teaching,
- Fledgling - used more than one instructional technology in my teaching, but was still time consuming to plan for, use and manage,
- Proficient - used more than one instructional technology daily/weekly in my teaching,
- Expert – trained or supported other teachers in my building/district/other with the use and management of instructional technology,
- N/A – have not used instructional technology in my teaching

9. What type of distance learning formats for instruction are you using/did you use during the COVID-19 pandemic face to face school closing? Select all that apply.

- Used a synchronous platform (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom) to provide group instruction;
- Used a synchronous platform (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom) to provide individual instruction;
- Used an asynchronous platform (e.g., Seesaw or other type of prerecorded instruction/ directions) to provide group instruction;
- Used an asynchronous platform (e.g., Seesaw or other type of prerecorded instruction/ directions) to provide individual instruction;

- Used instructional materials sent out via email to students and/or parents/guardians;
- Used printed instructional materials picked up by parents/guardians;
- Used printed instructional materials delivered to students;
- None of the above. I did not provide instructional resources to my students – please explain

10. How often and by what methods did you correspond with students and/or parents/guardians? Select all that apply.

- Corresponded with students and/or parents/guardians as a group
 - Daily (Monday – Friday)
 - Weekly
 - Other (Please describe)
- Corresponded with students and/or parents/guardians individually
 - Daily (Monday – Friday)
 - Weekly
 - Other (Please describe)
- Corresponded with students via the following platform(s)
 - An online platform with face to face video (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom);
 - Email
 - Phone
 - Text
 - U.S. Mail
 - Other method (Please describe)

11. How did you complete required IEP/IFSP meetings and timelines? Select all that apply.

- An online platform with face to face video (e.g., Google Meet, Zoom);
- Email to send paperwork and correspond with parents/guardians;
- Phone
- Text
- U.S. Mail, Used printed materials/instructional materials delivered to parents/guardians;
- Other method (Please describe)

12. Coping can be defined as *constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person* (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Self-evaluate your coping style in managing the demands and changes in your special education teaching role as a result of COVID-19?

INSTRUCTIONS: These items deal with ways you've been coping with the stress in your life since distance learning went into effect with COVID-19. There are many ways to try to deal with problems. These items ask what you've been doing to cope with the COVID-19 school changes. Obviously, different people deal with things in different ways, but we are interested in how you've tried to deal with it. Each item says something about a particular way of coping. We want to know to what extent you've been doing what the

item says. How much or how frequently. Don't answer on the basis of whether it seems to be working or not—just whether or not you're doing it. Use these response choices. Try to rate each item separately in your mind from the others. Make your answers as true FOR YOU as you can. Survey questions taken from Carver, 1997.

- Select yes to answer question 12 prompts on coping.
- Select no to skip question 12 prompts on coping.

ANSWERS:

1 = I haven't been doing this at all

2 = I've been doing this a little bit

3 = I've been doing this a medium amount

4 = I've been doing this a lot

QUESTIONS:

1. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.
2. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.
3. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."
4. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.
5. I've been getting emotional support from others.
6. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.
7. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.
8. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.
9. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.
10. I've been getting help and advice from other people.
11. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.
12. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.
13. I've been criticizing myself.
14. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.
15. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.
16. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.
17. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.
18. I've been making jokes about it.
19. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.

20. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.
21. I've been expressing my negative feelings.
22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.
23. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.
24. I've been learning to live with it.
25. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.
26. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.
27. I've been praying or meditating.
28. I've been making fun of the situation.

13. What resources or information has been most helpful to you during the COVID-19 pandemic face to face school closing?

- Information from professional teaching organizations or media;
- Information from social networking education groups (e.g., Facebook);
- Information from my school district/school;
- Information from my immediate team members and colleagues;
- other – please explain;
- skip response

14. What resources or information has been least helpful to you during the COVID-19 pandemic face to face school closing?

- Information from professional teaching organizations or media;
- Information from social networking education groups (e.g., Facebook);
- Information from my school district/school;
- Information from my immediate team members and colleagues;
- other – please explain;
- skip response

15. Would you be willing to participate in a confidential interview (approximately 1 hour) to share more information on your experience and role as a special education teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic school closing? Interviews will be conducted adhering to relevant social distancing guidelines.

- Yes; If yes, please provide your name and best email contact address or email Laura Medwetz at lmmedwetz@stthomas.edu
- no
- skip response

Appendix 5: Phase Two Interview Consent Form

Research Participation Key Information
Consent for Participation in Interview Research
Pandemic: Impact on the Role of the Special Education Teacher

What you will be asked to do:

We ask participants to participate in a virtual interview and review interview transcript.

The time commitment is about one hour for an interview and approximately 30 minutes to review interview transcript and the study will take place using a virtual meeting space.

Participating in this study has risks:

- Possible emotional distress
- Recalling traumatic or distressing events
- Probing for sensitive information in the interview

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

You are invited to participate in a research study about the role of the special education teacher (e.g., instruction and due process requirements) and their ability to adapt/cope during the “stay at home order” due to COVID-19, Spring 2020. The title of this study is 2020 Pandemic: Impact of the Role of the Special Education Teacher. You were selected as a possible participant and are eligible to participate in the study because you are a licensed Special Education Teacher (state provisional or full license) and have volunteered to participate in an interview. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether you would like to participate or not.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in a one-hour interview via Zoom meeting technology (virtual/synchronous meeting platform).
- You are one of at least five participants volunteering to participate in an interview.
- You will be provided the interview questions prior to the scheduled interview. You may skip any questions you are asked during the interview.
- The interview will be audio recorded using Zoom audio transcript technology. A back up digital audio recording device will also be used to anticipate any difficulties with Zoom technology. The interview will result in a transcript of the interview. Your name and the names of school and district will be deleted from the transcript. You will be provided a pseudo name.
- You will be asked to review the transcript from your interview. You may delete any information you provided in the interview from the transcript. This information will be permanently deleted from the research data and information.

What are the risks of being in the study?

The study has risks:

- Given the stressors on personal, family, or employment changes due to COVID-19, participants could experience possible emotional distress and/or recalling traumatic or distressing events. You will also be asked questions that are sensitive in nature. Participants will self-volunteer to complete the interview.
- You may skip any questions provided by the interviewer and you are free to withdraw at any time up to and after the interview is conducted.
- Participant names will remain confidential in the interview results. A summary of interview responses will be shared with the participant to ensure accuracy of information shared and the opportunity to omit specific information previously provided via the interview.

Here is more information about why we are doing this study:

This study is being conducted by Laura Medwetz, MS, primary investigator and Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan, PhD, co-investigator from the Department of Special Education, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN. This study was reviewed for risks and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

The purpose of this study is to gather information on how special education teachers adapted to changes in their role and coped with those changes. We value your participation in the interview since you are navigating/navigated the current "stay home" environment while attending to roles and responsibilities of your special education position. We recognize adapting to the COVID-19 "stay at home order" as a professional intersects with your own personal and family well being. An interview format provides an opportunity to gather more specific information from a diverse span of special educators. This study is important to the field of special education to better understand what support, resources, and professional development special education teachers require in both pre-service programs and school/district activities.

The direct benefits you will receive for participating are: You may benefit in your own profession from reflecting about your experiences. Reflection is part of an educators professional practice. Teachers learn from examining their own practices.

We believe your privacy and confidentiality is important. Here is how we will protect your personal information:

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. The Zoom meeting (virtual meeting platform) will be password protected. This means only you and the interviewer will have access to the virtual meeting space.

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any reports I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include:

- The audio recordings from the interview will be stored in a secure St. Thomas electronic account. Only Laura Medwetz, primary investigator and Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan, co-investigator will have access to the audio recording or transcript file via the St. Thomas electronic account.
- The audio recording will be destroyed/deleted from the St. Thomas electronic account when a transcript of the interview has been secured. A pseudo name will be identified for you transcript so no personal identifying information (e.g., name, school name) will be associated with your interview transcript. The interview transcript file will be stored in the secure St. Thomas electronic account.

Though I will do everything I can to protect your confidentiality, State law and ethical standards require that I report any disclosure of the following to appropriate local or State authorities:

- **Clear and imminent danger or harm to yourself or others, or**
- **Suspected or confirmed abuse or neglect of a child or a vulnerable adult.**

All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years once the study is completed. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas have the right to inspect all research records for researcher compliance purposes.

This study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the research with no penalties of any kind.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether to participate or not will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed unless it is already de-identified or published and I can no longer delete your data. You can withdraw by emailing Laura Medwetz at lmedwetz@stthomas.edu or Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan at lstansberry@stthomas.edu. You are also free to skip any questions I/we may ask in the interview.

Who you should contact if you have a question:

My name is Laura Medwetz. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions before or after we meet, you may contact me at 507-581-6543 or lmedwetz@stthomas.edu. Information about study participant rights is available online at <https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/>. You may also contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns (reference project number 1596347-1 2020).

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

Appendix 6: Phase Two Interview Questions

Interview Questions

2020 Pandemic: Impact on the Role of the Special Education Teacher

IRB Net Tracking #: 1596347-1

Thank you volunteering for an interview for the study 1596347-1 2020 Pandemic: Impact on the Role of the Special Education Teacher. Your interest in voluntarily participating in an interview is appreciated. This study is being conducted by Laura Medwetz, MS and Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan, PhD, Department of Special Education, School of Education. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN.

Who you should contact if you have a question:

My name is Laura Medwetz. You may ask any questions you have now and at any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions before or after we meet, you may contact me at 507-581-6543 or lmmedwetz@stthomas.edu. Information about study participant rights is available online at <https://www.stthomas.edu/irb/policiesandprocedures/forstudyparticipants/>. You may also contact Sarah Muenster-Blakley with the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns (reference project number 1596347-1 2020).

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Consent Discussion: Review the consent form completed prior to scheduling the interview. Ask a variety of questions to ensure participant understanding of informed consent. Examples:

- What should you do if you wish to withdraw from this study?
- What should you do if you want to remove information you presented in the interview after reviewing the interview transcript?
- What should you do if you are not comfortable answering an interview question?
- What should you do if become uncomfortable or experience any state of distress during the interview?

Introduction:

- Describe your role as a special educator during typical face to face school conditions (caseload, age/disability areas, instructional role, due process, etc.)
 - At this time (time of interview), when have you last had face to face (in-person) contact with your students?
- 1) How do you/did you provide specialized instruction to students on your case load during the pandemic face to face school closing?
 - What have been the challenges?
 - What have been areas of learning to take forward in your teaching?
 - 2) How do you/did you attend to due process procedures/timelines (e.g., IEPs, Sped evaluations) during the pandemic face to face school closing?
 - What have been the challenges?
 - What have been areas of learning to take forward in your work?

- 3) How do you/did you attend to communicate, interact and/or support parents/guardians during the pandemic face to face school closing?
 - What have been the challenges?
 - What have been areas of learning to take forward in your work?
- 4) How have the changes in your role impacted your ability to cope with, manage, and/or adapt to your responsibilities as a SPEDT during and after the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic?
- 5) What factors in your role (student, family, district, home life) presented challenges during the pandemic face to face school closing. What resources (people, district, prior knowledge, media, other) did you use to learn new skills or develop new approaches to fulfill your responsibilities as a SPEDT?
- 6) What approaches or resources (people, district, prior knowledge, media, other) did you use to manage, cope and/or adapt to the changes in your SPEDT role during COVID-19 (or after)

Appendix 7: Phase Three – Life Grid Visual Tool

Life Grid Running Record

Participant: Pseudo Name

Focus Months for Research Study Enter Date of Interviews	Instructional Practice and Technology	Parent/Guardian Collaboration and Due Process	Managing the Work and Coping	Collegial Support and Professional Development
August				
September				
October				
November				
December				
January				
February				
March				
April				