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Early Career Special Education Teacher Lived Experiences During COVID-19

Sydney Parks
Lynn University

LYNN UNIVERSITY | Donald E. and Helen L. Ross COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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_____
Name   *Signature*

Committee Member:

_____
Name   *Signature*

External Committee Member:

_____
Name   *Signature*

_____   _____
Dr. Kathleen Weigel, Dean/Ed.D. Director   *Date*

ABSTRACT

EARLY CAREER SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER LIVED EXPERIENCES

DURING COVID-19

The stories and lived experiences of Early Career Special Education Teachers must be shared. This study provides more information on the beginning lived experiences of Special Education Teachers during COVID-19. The researcher conducted a qualitative narrative design to further investigate burnout and self-efficacy among Early Career Special Education Teachers. The researcher conducted an open-ended question interview that allowed participants to relive their experience teaching during COVID-19. The conclusion of this study is that Special Education Teachers love their job but seek more financial security, administrative support and guidance, recognition.

Order Number: _____

EARLY CAREER SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER LIVED EXPERIENCES

DURING COVID-19

Sydney Parks, Ed. D

Lynn University

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Thank you to my brothers, friends, and PBSFA colleagues for inspiring and challenging me to be better every day.

See the good.

Syd

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my grandparents, Charlie Parks and Sandra Parks,

to my brother, Peter,

to Jordan and my students,

Marilyn Cedeño and to undervalued Special Education Teachers.

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

There is a critical Special Education Teacher shortage in Florida (FLDOE, 2022).

Almost 20% of all Exceptional Student Education courses taught in Florida were taught

by a teacher who was not certified in Special Education (FLDOE, 2022). The Florida

Department of Education continued their efforts to retain and employ veteran and early

career teachers by changing recruiting methods, by giving exceptions to military veterans

and their spouses, and by weakening the certification requirements (FLDOE, 2022).

However, Florida continued to experience a teacher shortage crisis with all subject areas,

but specialty courses and Special Education courses had the highest vacancies (FLDOE,

2022). COVID-19 changed education and instruction rapidly and dramatically for

teachers and students (Ballotepedia, 2022). Students went from face-to-face instruction to

remote learning. Remote learning varied due to resources and efforts. Current research

provided evidence that prior to COVID-19, Special Education Teachers sought more

support from administration and felt emotional and physical exhaustion (Martinez, 2022;

Turner 2019). This study was designed to provide insight on lived experiences of Early

Career Special Education Teachers who began their career during COVID-19.

Background

In fall 2021, 49.5 million students were enrolled K-12th public education

(National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022). In the fall of 2020, 4.7 million

students were enrolled in private education. Out of those 54.2 million students, 7.2

million students received services (NCES, 2022). These students received services by an

IEP or 504 to ensure an equal opportunity to education was granted. Under the IDEA, 21

disabilities must be supported in public education by services, teachers, therapists, and more. For the 2020-21 school year, 33% of those served under the IDEA were identified with a Specific Learning Disability, 19% with a Speech and Language Impairment, 15% with an Other Health Impairment, 12% with Autism Spectrum Disorder, 7% with a Development Delay, 6% with Intellectual Disability, 5% with Emotional Disturbance, 2% with multiple disabilities, and 1% with Hearing Impairments (NCES, 2022). In the 2020-2021 school year, 2,858,949 students out of 54.2 million received public education in Florida (Corcoran, 2020). 414,353, 14% of Florida's student population, received Special Education services (Corcoran, 2020). In May 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Statistics reported that 38,000 people were employed as a Special Education Teacher with a mean wage of $71,330 in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Florida employed 4,000 Special Education Teachers with an average salary of $63,000- 67,000 (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Early Career Special Education Teachers received a base salary of $47,500 but could receive bonuses and incentives for extra certifications and qualifications (FLDOE, 2022).

The FLDOE completed an extensive report on which certification areas were in great need of teachers for the 2021-22 school year. The teacher shortage areas were Science-General, English, Exceptional Student Education, Science-Physical, Reading, Technical Education, Science- Earth & Space, English for Speaker of Other Languages, and Math (FLDOE, 2022). Nearly 20 % of Special Education courses were taught by teachers who were not certified or vacant whereas all general education courses only have 10% or less not vacant by certified teachers or vacant (FLDOE, 2022). To become a fully certified Special Education Teacher in Florida, you must:

1. Complete a Special Education Program

2. Complete practical Special Education Teacher requirements

3. Complete the FTCE tests (General Knowledge Test, subject test (Exceptional Student Education), and the Professional Education Test)

4. Obtain Special Education Teacher Certification

5. Maintain and Renew Teaching License (FLDOE, 2022)

If teachers obtained a M.Ed. in a Special Education program, those teachers did not have to take the General Knowledge Test but were required to take the Professional Education test and Exceptional Student test (FLDOE, 2022).

Pivot to Remote Learning 2020

In March 2020, the World Health Organization deemed COVID-19 a global pandemic and by March 13, 2020, the United States Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control mandated quarantining and brick-and-mortar schools closed and transitioned to remote learning across the United States. The Florida Department of Education declared Florida in a State of Emergency that required all 69 school districts to shut down for two weeks with no instruction required and then extended the shutdown until April 14th, 2020 (Ballotpedia, 2022). Suddenly, 166,002 teachers in 4,202 schools were responsible for providing virtual instruction to 2.8 million students in the state of Florida (NCES, 2022; Ballotpedia, 2022). Within that 2.8 million, 414,353 students with disabilities needed accommodations, modifications, and related services provided virtually. As COVID-19 diagnoses began to increase, virtual learning was extended until May 1st (Ballotpedia, 2022). Soon after, it was declared schools would remain closed for the remainder of the school year and summer school. In June 2022, it was declared that

Florida schools might return in person if chosen by their district for the upcoming school year but shortly after it was mandated that schools return in person by August 31st. Many districts argued that the decision was unconstitutional and continued virtual instruction (Ballotpedia, 2022). By the end of September 2020, almost all schools were in person in Florida.

Early Career Special Education Teachers entered the field in 2019-2022. Early Career Special Education Teachers experienced immediate pivot to online learning and missed the opportunity for traditional onboarding (Council of Great Schools, 2021). Early Career Special Education Teachers, who entered the field in 2019, began their first year face-to-face then transitioned immediately and gradually to online learning. Those Early Career Special Education Teachers who entered the field in 2020, experienced immediate virtual learning that transitioned back to face to face or continued virtual instruction. Those Early Career Special Education Teachers who entered the field in 2021, experienced in-person instruction but became responsible for loss and gains that occurred during virtual instruction.

Significance of the Study

Special Education Teacher retention is a continuous problem in Florida (FLDOE, 2020). Only 10.18% of teachers in the state of Florida hold ESE certifications (FLDOE, 2020). In Florida, 8,860 courses which is 19.27% of the ESE courses available were taught by teachers who were not certified in the field. At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, 880, 24.02%, ESE positions were vacant (FLDOE, 2020). Special Education Teacher candidates have decreased over the last decade (Camera, 2022). Students identified as needing special education services has increased over the last decade

(NCES, 2022). The need to coach and mentor beginning Special Education Teachers is paramount to their retention in the profession (Thomas, Hicks, & Vanatter, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic changed the delivery of educational instruction to exclusively remote learning, more specifically the instruction given by special educators changed dramatically (Zhao & Watterson, 2021). Beginning Special Educators starting their career during COVID-19 were at a distinct disadvantage without the support of the typical brick and mortar coaching and mentoring by administrators and veteran special educators (Hall-Mills, Johnson, Gross, Latham, & Everhart, 2022). The study seeked to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of beginning Special Education Teachers who began their teaching careers during remote learning and COVID-19.

Rationale

Theoretical and/or Conceptual Framework

Albert Bandura, psychologist, defines self-efficacy as "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations (Bandura, 1977; Lopez-Garrido, 2020)." Self-efficacy is people's beliefs controlling their own functions and events that affect their lives (Lopez-Garrido, 2020). Self-efficacy includes motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishments. According to Bandura, people's beliefs were influenced by mastery experience, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional states (Lopez-Garrido, 2020). A person with high self-efficacy would experience less stress and negative life events in contrast to someone who has low self-efficacy. This study intended to discover the problem of practice by investigating the self-efficacy of participants. A grand-tour question followed by additional open-ended audio and video-taped questions may allow participants to express positive and negative experiences during COVID-19 that could have affected their ability to perform a task.

Participants may have provided lived experiences of encouragement and discouragement. Participants may have provided information on their emotional state during COVID-19. Participants may have discussed a fluctuation of their self-efficacy with the transition from face-to-face to remote learning or remote learning to face-to-face learning. Bandura stated that the most influential source of someone's self-efficacy is previous performances or mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977) (Garrido, 2020). Emotional, physical, and psychological well-being can influence a person's abilities. The researcher intended to collect information that could contribute to the effects of COVID-19 on early Special Education Teachers.

Context of the Study

The researcher conducted a Qualitative Narrative Design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants must have entered the special education field during COVID-19. Participants must obtained a temporary or full teaching license. Participants must currently or previously taught in a special education high incidence or low incidence disability classroom. Participants volunteered to answer open-ended questions during an audio or video interview conducted face-to-face or zoom. The researcher asked the participants a series of open-ended questions. The researcher asked for clarification if necessary. The researcher collected data by using two audio-recording devices.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the knowledge and awareness of early career Special Education Teachers lived experiences during COVID-19. The purpose of this study was to collect lived experiences of Special Education Teachers to identify the impact COVID-19 had on their careers mentally and physically. This study provided a better understanding of Early Career Special Education Teacher struggles and

accomplishments. Information collected could contribute to better treatment of educators and influence more training opportunities.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of beginning Special Education Teachers that began their teaching career during COVID-19 remote learning?

Assumptions

Based off Albert Bandura theory of self-efficacy, it can be assumed that if a participant had a negative experience in their early career of teaching, the participant would describe that experience (Bandura, 1977; Lopez-Garrido, 2020). It is possible that participants who had negative experience could be less motivated. It could be assumed that if an Early Career Special Education Teacher had a positive experience with the transitions from remote learning to face-to-face, the participants would have provided positive experiences that could influence self-growth. It can be assumed that based off their experiences, participants behavior may vary while answering open-ended questions. It could be assumed that participants who experienced a negative experience may have decided to not continue the interview if the participants became uncomfortable. It could be assumed participants used similar vocabulary when describing experiences due to their field of expertise and current employment.

Definitions of Terms

Distance (remote) learning- educators not in their traditional classroom setting providing instruction to students not in their traditional classroom setting; instruction was provided through online platforms and communication between teachers and students in through various online platforms (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022)

Online platforms- a webspace or portal that offers educational content, resources, and instruction to students (MyComputerCareer, 2022)

Exceptional Student Education (ESE)- cost-free instruction and related services for children with disabilities who need and qualify for specifically designed instruction (FLDOE, 2022)

Special Education- cost-free designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a student including instruction in the classroom, at home, hospitals, physical education, and other settings (USDOE, 2022). The terms special education and ESE may be used interchangeably in this study.

Facilitation teaching- trainings for teachers to acquire new skills for classroom instruction and management (ATD, 2022)

Self-contained teaching- students receive instruction in multiple subjects by the same educator throughout the day (Michigan Department of Education, 2022)

High incidence disabilities- students with significant disabilities and/or multiple disabilities that affect their learning environment and require appropriate intervention services (USDOE, 2022)

Low incidence disabilities- any impairment is physical or mental that requires appropriate intervention services (USDOE, 2022)

Organization of the Dissertation

This study provided an extensive research literature review that identified lived experiences prior to COVID-19, information on the duties of Special Education Teachers, and students who qualify for Special Education services provided and protected under the IDEA. The researcher provides an explicit overview of the timeline of COVID-19 in Florida. The researcher conducted interviews in hopes to gather information on lived

experiences of early Special Education Teachers. The researcher analyzed the data

collected from open-ended interviews and find common themes and patterns. Research

collected intended to contribute to the experiences of special education and provide

suggestions to assist early career Special Education Teachers.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The attrition rate of Special Education Teachers continues to rise (FLDOE, 2022).

The attrition rate is at an all-time high for Special Education Teachers. Research provided

a plethora of information on veteran and novice teachers before the pandemic that

changed education in the United States in 2020 (Martinez, 2019; Turner, 2019). Still,

there is little information on the type of support teachers receive, do not receive, or their

preferred support in their first to third years which began right before or during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, there were few sources to explain the lived

experiences of early career Special Education Teachers who began their careers just

before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. Special Education Educators can teach in

many environments, such as self-contained, push/pull in, and inclusion. According to the

American Educational Research Journal, students lost 54 days in a school year when a

teacher left in the middle of the year (Jones, 2020). In 2019, it was reported that 7.2

million students received services (NCES, 2022). In 2020-2021, Out of the 2,858,949

students who received public education in Florida, 414,353 students received Exceptional

Student Education in 2020 (Corcoran, 2022). Under the IDEA, 21 disabilities must be

supported in public education. In most scenarios, Special Education Teachers entered the

field with a degree in education and certification. But due to the lack of Special Education Teachers, schools hired professionals that would be considered full-time and part-time substitutes, held temporary licenses and alternative degrees, and more (FLDOE, 2022).

Pre-COVID Attrition and Retention of Early Career Special Teacher Research

Research collected before the pandemic concluded that teachers felt emotional and physical exhaustion, stress, and lack of job satisfaction (Martinez, 2019). Teachers sought more support and guidance from the administration, but there was a lack of information on what support, professional development, and other necessities could benefit their teaching environment. Turner investigated the attrition causes to determine the increase in attrition rather than retention among Special Education Teachers. This study represented Special Education Teachers (SET) in South Carolina, intending to leave and stay in the field. The researcher applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (microsystem, mesosystem ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) to create and distribute a survey that could show possible attrition causes (Turner, 2019). Stress, students, administration support, and career satisfaction were the topics included in the study. A Likert scale and open-ended questions gathered information from participants. Results showed that career satisfaction and students were the cause of attrition, but many teachers choose not to respond on what factors could be why they were leaving. According to Turner, forty-four states have reported SETs shortages, especially in lower socioeconomic districts. The exact reason why SETs were leaving was still unknown (Turner, 2019). Administration support and career satisfaction seem to fall below those two aspects. The high attrition rate causes schools to hire unqualified and less

experienced individuals in the Special Education field. It is possible that more than 450,000 Florida students may have started the school year without full-time, certified teachers in their classrooms (FEA, 2022). This research literature review provides information gathered from qualitative and quantitative methodology before the pandemic, emphasizing the lack of solutions for novice Special Education Teacher attrition rate in the United States.

Quantitative research completed by Taddeo identified the resilience that veterans Special Education withhold compared to novice Special Education Teachers. Taddeo considered that more than 72% of Special Education Teachers did not receive the proper training on classroom management (Taddeo, 2020). This data determined what characteristics a veteran teacher exhibited that deters them from burnout or leaving the field during difficult times, unlike novice teachers (Taddeo, 2020). The quantitative study included teachers in the profession for more than ten years and teachers for five or fewer. A Student Teacher Professional Identity Scale, Coping Scale, Resilience Scale, Psychological Evaluation, and Efficacy Scale were implemented in the survey to compare veteran and novice teachers. The lowest scores were organization, coping ability, and emotional stability among novice and veteran teachers. Both teachers' highest scores were similar, including agreeableness, professional identity, efficacy, and physiological capital (Taddeo, 2020). Veteran teachers had similar traits to novice teachers. The significance of this research is that it identified the attrition crisis within Special Education in the United States before COVID-19. There is a unique education teacher shortage (Taddeo, 2020).

Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) ensures that children with disabilities receive an equal opportunity to education and early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. With the IDEA, children have access to a Free Appropriate Public Education that meets their needs and prepares them for independent living and employment. Students with disabilities such as Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Other Health Impairments (OHI), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Emotional Behavioral Disturbance (E/BD), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI), Visual Impairments (VI), Deaf or Heard of Hearing (DHH), Dual Sensory Impairment (DSI), Orthopedic Impairment (OI), Intellectual Disability (InD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Developmentally Delayed (DD), and Hospital Homebound (HH). The Florida Department of Education defines students with these disabilities as:

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)- A student with this disorder has difficulty understanding and displaying skills such as reading, writing, spelling, speaking, and completing calculations. Some SLD are dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, or developmental aphasia (FLDOE, 2022).

Other Health Impairments (OHI)- A student who has limited or heightened alertness like asthma and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (FLDOE, 2022).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)- A student whose impairments range from mild to severe "such as social interaction, communication, and the presence of restricted repetitive, and/or stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (FLDOE, 2022)."

Emotional Behavioral Disturbance (EBD)- A student who displays intensified emotional and behavioral responses that have not declined with the implementation of evidence-based practices. These emotional and behavioral responses affect their educational environment (FLDOE, 2022).

Developmentally Delayed (DD)- Students that show different growth compared to peers ages three to five years old could be developmentally delayed until they meet grade-level requirements (FLDOE, 2022).

Language Impairment (LI)- A student with a language impairment affects the student's communication and learning environment. The student has difficulty processing oral and written language, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (FLDOE, 2022).

Speech Impairment (SI)- A student with a Speech Impairment exhibits difficulties with sounds, fluency, or voice that impacts their communication and academic environment. Students may have one or more speech sound disorders, phonological disorder, articulation disorder, fluency disorder, and voice disorder (FLDOE, 2022).

Visual Impairments- A student who has little vision or is blind that is affecting their academic performance in their educational environment (FLDOE, 2022).

Deaf or Heard of Hearing (DHH)- A student who is considered deaf or hard of hearing that is aided or not aided. This impairment affects the processing of oral linguistic information (FLDOE, 2022).

Dual Sensory Impairment (DSI)- A student with vision and hearing loss impairments that affect the ability to retain and acquire information and communicate (FLDOE, 2022).

Orthopedic Impairment (OI)- A student with a severe skeletal muscular and/or neuromuscular impairment from congenital anomalies or other causes (FLDOE, 2022). Disabilities such as spina bifida, cerebral palsy, and more would be considered an Orthopedic Impairment.

Intellectual Disability (InD)- A student with an intellectual disability is below their developmental period's intellectual and adaptive functioning level (FLDOE, 2022).

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)- A student who had an injury to the brain caused by a physical force. The injury impacted total or partial functionality, including social-emotional and academic ability (FLDOE, 2022).

Hospital Homebound- A student that is homebound or hospitalized that has a medical diagnosis of "physical or psychiatric condition which is acute or catastrophic in nature, or a chronic illness, or a repeated intermittent illness due to a persisting medical problem and that confines the student to home or hospital, and restricts activities for an extended period of time (FLDOE, 2022)."

It is crucial to recognize that students may have more than one disability listed above that needs support in the classroom. The IDEA also protects the rights of students with disabilities and their parents. Consent from a parental guardian must be given for evaluations and support provided. The Florida Department of Education mandates all districts to provide Exceptional Student Education programs to those students eligible ages three to twenty-two years old and support those programs implemented for students

with disabilities. School districts are responsible for providing accommodations, modifications, and related services to ensure those students have an equal opportunity in the classroom. Special Education is defined as "specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents or guardians, to meet the unique needs of a disabled child, including classroom instruction, instruction in physical education, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (USDOE, 2022)." These services can be provided through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is created by a multidisciplinary team that includes the child's present strengths and needs, goals, Special Education, and related services. Related services is defined as "transportation, and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services (including speech pathology and audiology, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, and medical and counseling services, except that such medical services shall be for diagnostic and evaluation purposes only) as may be required to assist a disabled child in benefiting from Special Education, and includes the early identification and assessment of handicapping conditions in children (USDOE, 2022).

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

The IEP informs teachers of expectations, modifications, accommodations, preferred settings, and related services the student may need to enhance their classroom performance. It is up to the teacher and other professionals to provide a Least Restrictive Environment for the student (Florida Health, 2022). The teacher is held accountable for maximum efforts to appropriately implement the IEP accommodations, modifications, and related services. IEP provides goals for professionals to work collaboratively in teaching styles that would benefit the student. A preferred setting for a student with a

disability with an IEP could be an inclusive setting with a Special Education Teacher. Special Education Teachers are responsible for meeting all students' accommodations and modifications in inclusive environments. Students could receive accommodations and modifications in an inclusive environment such as assistive technology, preferred seating, one-on-one instruction, timers, first/then boards, and more. The Florida Constitution Article IX, Section 1, ensures that the maximum number of prekindergarten to grade 12 students does not exceed 18, 22, and 25 in a classroom. Within the constitution, there were no laws that require Special Education classrooms to abide by class size requirements (Florida Legislature, 2022). The Florida Department of Education suggests in an inclusive environment the student-to-teacher ratio should be three students to one teacher (Florida Senate, 2022). Data is collected by those on the disciplinary team to evaluate the results and take further action in continuous planning and implementing appropriate instructional practices. Special Education Teachers could be considered isolated because of the variety of abilities and disabilities in their classroom especially in a non-specialized school (Lee, 2020). Qualitative research completed by Lee studied collaboration amongst teachers who taught students with significant cognitive disabilities. A collaborative lesson plan was provided to teachers who taught students with significant cognitive disabilities. The purpose of implementing the collaborative model was to determine if it had a negative or positive effect on teachers (Lee, 2020). Teachers were evaluated before implementing the collaborative model, three weeks after implementation, and six weeks after implementation. Data collected provided that collaborative lesson planning had positive outcomes among all teachers, but teachers did express they did not have enough time to collaborate efficiently and effectively (Lee,

2020). This study did not determine if collaborative lesson planning improved Special Education Teachers' entire experience in their environment.

Special Education Teachers

2Section (s.) 1012.07 mandates that the State Board of Education identifies teacher shortages annually. SBE Rule 6A20.0131, Florida Administrative Code, requires the list to include shortage areas that are a high priority area and high need content areas (FLDOE, 2022) that displays:

1. "The number and percentage of positions in each discipline filled by teachers not certified in the appropriate field;

2. The annual supply of graduates of state-approved Florida teacher education programs for each discipline;

3. The number and percentage of vacant positions in each teaching discipline; and

4. Critical teacher shortage areas which may be identified pursuant to rules adopted by district school boards. These areas shall be identified based on consideration of at least the information specified in items one through three above and submitted to the Department of Education no later than June 1st of each year (FLDOE, 2022)."

Data collected in 2019-2020 provided by the FLDOE, 10.18% of teachers in the state of Florida held ESE certifications. Districts preferred to hire teachers that were certified in the appropriate field to ensure students received quality instruction. Statewide there were 65,272 ESE courses and 8,860 courses which were 19.27% of the ESE courses available were taught by teachers who were not certified in the field (FLDOE, 2022). The FLDOE made an effort to project future vacancies for the 2020-21 school year based on

the number of vacancies years prior, with other factors considered. At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, 880, 24.02%, ESE positions were vacant, and the state projected that 19.68% of ESE positions would be vacant (FLDOE, 2022). Data collected showed that the projection was almost 5% lower than vacancies. In 2018-2019, 481 students completed their teaching education programs for ESE. It is crucial to notice that the number of teachers that completed an education program to become a teacher in 2018-19 was significantly lower than vacant positions for the 2020-21 school year (FLDOE, 2022).

Pre-service and Beginning Special Education mentoring/Sustainability Programs

A *Quantitative Examination of Traditional and Alternative Special Education Teacher Preparedness with a Concentration on Teacher Enrollment across Kentucky and Southern Regional Board States* completed by Riley studied Special Education Teachers who entered the field fully certified compared to teachers who entered the field with alternative certifications. Transitional, participative, and behavioral theories were applied to the research (Riley, 2020). The survey was distributed randomly to Special Education Teachers in Kentucky and the other Southern States, and the first question asked teachers to state their degree and certifications. Only 22 teachers had a degree in Special Education; the remainder had a degree in Psychology, Elementary Education, and various alternative degrees to Special Education such as business, criminal justice, and more (Riley, 2020). Data collected showed similarities among Special Education certified teachers and alternative degree teachers, social studies, and science. Data collected showed that alternative teachers felt less prepared than Special Education Teachers.

With an increase of hiring professionals who lack experience, degrees, certifications, it is important that administrators find alternative solutions to help these teachers gain knowledge similar to an experienced and qualified veteran Special Education Teacher. Mrstik, Pearl, Hopkins, Vasquez, Eleazar, & Marino used open-ended interview questions with five Special Education Teachers who taught elementary to high school prior to the pandemic. Interviews varied from 25-35 minutes in length. Questions included topics such as a typical daily routine, support, success in the classroom, and stay or leave. Common themes found among the responses per question were enthusiasm, sadness, frustration, support, and workload (Mrstik et al., 2019). Many participants who responded positively also reported negative responses about the field. Researchers suggest that a continuous induction, mentor, or support program would be most beneficial to teachers with the data collected (Mrstik et al., 2019). The significance of this study is that researchers acknowledged that teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) received social/emotional instruction combined with academics. In most cases, depending on the severity, students required more social/emotional instructional time than those identified as high-functioning who received more academics. Social/Emotional instruction was difficult to complete virtually. Teachers interviewed mentioned the work conditions and low pay. This research has led to identifying if teachers received higher pay and better support, it would make these challenges with social/emotional abilities and disabilities easier to handle in the classroom.

COVID-19 and Special Education Teaching

Prior to the shutdown of schools due to COVID-19, *Parent-Teacher Relationships of Students Diagnosed with Autism, Job Burnout, and Stress as Predictors of Teacher*

Self-Efficacy, research completed by Shook, seeked to identify teachers' burnout, stress, and relationships with parents who teach students diagnosed with ASD (Shook, 2020). Over 200 teachers with ASD students in various secondary education Facebook groups participated in the study. Shook considered teaching being rated as one of the top five most stressful professions in the nation when developing the qualitative survey (Shook, 2020). Also, children with ASD impairments include social-emotional difficulties and restricted and repetitive interests, which teachers considered challenging to introduce a new curriculum. An Occupational Stress Factor Questionnaire and Burnout Inventory Scale were provided to participants to complete through survey monkey. Common self-efficacy factors were student engagement, personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion—higher emotional exhaustion and stress responses correlated with lower student engagement and personal accomplishment feelings. The significance of this study is that positive teacher and parents' relationships improve a student's academic ability and experience (Shook, 2020). Other data collected brings attention to teachers feeling that they cannot meet the needs of ASD students in their classroom, but there is not enough research showing the emotional effect of lack of job satisfaction and fulfillment.

Florida is nationally recognized for its virtual instruction opportunities (FLDOE, 2021). Florida is recognized as the largest state virtual school in the nation. Every district in Florida offers online schools, programs, and/or courses. Teachers who teach these online courses must be certified and the curriculum must align with state standards. Full-time public virtual education students participate in state assessments and accountable school grades. Data collected from 2019-2020 enrollment showed that 306,753 full-time students and 12,567 part-time students attended the Florida Virtual

School (FLDOE, 2021). At the district level, part-time and full-time students were enrolled in the District Franchise of FLVS, District Virtual Instruction Program, Distinct Virtual Course Offerings, and Virtual Chart Schools. At the District level, 98,934 students were enrolled part-time, and 61,789 students were enrolled full-time. 6, 631 students were enrolled at virtual charter schools (FLDOE, 2021). There were 7 statutes that impacted virtual education and student eligibility. These statutes determined the educational choice, student's eligibility, graduation requirements, and guidelines for programs to meet Florida state standards.

The outbreak of COVID-19 began in China in 2019, and the first case in the United States was in January 2020. At that time, research to cure or prevent this virus was evolving. The patient's symptoms varied from mild to severe. Since COVID-19 was one of the many diseases or conditions that must be reported to the state, people could see the rapid increase of those infected within the nation. States began to take precautions by limiting the number of persons in places, mask requirements, and canceled significant events. On March 13, 2020, the Florida Department of Education declared Florida in a State of Emergency that required all schools to shut down for two weeks with no instruction required (Ballotpedia, 2022). The Florida Department of Education extended the shutdown until April 14th, 2020, but virtual instruction was mandated. 166,002 teachers became responsible for providing virtual instruction to 2.8 million students in the state of Florida (NCES, 2022). Within that 2.8 million, 414,353 students with disabilities needed accommodations, modifications, and related services provided virtually. The requirements of virtual instruction varied per district and school. Requirements included a Google classroom, attendance, Zoom, and more. Soon after, it

was extended until May 1st, and the numbers of those infected kept rising. Governor DeSantis declared that schools would not open for the remainder of the year to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In June, it was declared that Florida schools might return in person if chosen by their district. It was mandated that schools return in person by August 31st, but it was declared unconstitutional, so many schools remained virtual (Ballotpedia, 2022). By the end of September 2020, almost all schools were in person in Florida.

Special Education Teacher Burnout During COVID-19 Pandemic

Teachers returned to a variety of classroom environments for the 2020-2021 school year. Many returned to students who forgot and were unfamiliarized with routines, instructional approaches, and the general classroom environment. Classrooms were still not the same with social distancing, hybrid teaching, virtual teaching, and mask requirements. Special Education Teachers had more and new job expectations along with making up regression among their students with disabilities (Pressley, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, the attrition rate for all teachers was 8%, and 15-30% of those teachers had less than five years of experience (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). Pressley conducted a qualitative study to gain information on teacher anxiety and burnout due to COVID-19. This study completed by Pressley was one of the first burnout in relation to COVID-19 studies, but Pressley focused on all teachers. The survey was conducted one month prior to teachers beginning the school year. The study included seven questions related to anxiety or burnout caused by COVID-19 in the last two weeks. Teachers responded with numerical values; high numbers represented a higher feeling of burnout and lower numbers represented some or no feeling of burnout. The average of all responses to the questions was 24 (Pressley, 2021). The significance of this study was the commonalities

of burnout responses from teachers based on years of experience. This study was significant because it acknowledged the new demands that were causing stress for teachers, but it did not specify stressors and solutions.

Prior to the pandemic, two studies were completed that applied the Maslach burnout theory; "Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the first scientifically developed measure of burnout and is used widely in research studies around the world (Maslach and Lieter, 2021)." Burnout can be defined as feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy (World Health Organization, 2019)." The MBI can determine the frequency and causes of those aspects of burnout. Burnout is determined when participants have more frequent negative responses. Maslach burnout includes emotional exhaustion (EE), cynicism (i.e., depersonalization; DP), and lack of personal accomplishment (PA). The first study completed by Bussey recognized that administrators, parents, and students were criticizing teachers. This criticism lead to a lack of motivation and preparation. If teachers were experiencing disruption, it is more complicated for the teacher to handle classroom management and so forth. The researcher explicitly acknowledged all scenarios that could lead to burnout. Over three hundred participants completed the survey (Bussey, 2020). Teachers' classroom environments varied from self-contained and low-high functioning Special Education classrooms. All taught 3rd grade and below, and the average teaching experience was seven years. Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Achievement, Collaboration, and Depersonalization was evaluated to determine if the classroom environment caused burnout (Bussey, 2020). The study determined that collaboration was the most significant stressor. Half of Special

Education Teachers leave within the first five years (Billingsley, 2004; Bussey, 2020). Research collected determined that Special Education Teachers who make it past the first five years or more were more than likely to stay in the field. The attrition rate is much higher for Special Education Teachers than General Education Teachers. Many have reported that burnout included multiple factors such as administration, stress, workload, classroom environment, and more. The significance of this study is that the Maslach Burnout method determined if a teacher excelled in a time of stress or hit burnout, which led them to leave the field, but this study did not provide detailed information on the factors or scenarios that caused the burnout.

Similar to the study with South Carolina participants, this study used the Maslach Theory to help deter burnout. This qualitative study included teacher perceptions and how to prevent their burnout. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews. Data collected was sorted by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Scott, 2019). The data was compared to others' responses for similarities and differences. The researcher studied emotional exhaustion concerning burnout as a factor that falls under depersonalization and personal accomplishment. However, emotional exhaustion affects students. Results collected showed that "tired of doing the same thing" and "not wanting to be at work" were the highest burnout factors (Scott, 2019). The lowest burnout factor was "limited support (Scott, 2019)." Results include frustration and the desire for change but similar to the study completed by Bussey, this qualitative study lacked detailed information that caused the burnout and support teachers were seeking.

Special Education Teacher Burnout Support

A quantitative study was completed to determine administrators' knowledge of Special Education and their relationship with the special teachers in the school. Data collected was used to determine if the support provided by the administration met the level of job satisfaction. Three surveys were sent electronically to multiple school districts. A 5-point Likert Scale completed responses. Results showed that the knowledge and support from the administration do affect Special Education Teacher satisfaction (Martinez, 2019). Workload correlated with collaboration, and most administrations had attended ESE training. This study was critical because Special Education Teacher attrition is impacted by satisfaction. The effectiveness of administration has a rippling effect on teachers and students. If teachers do not see support modeled and given by the administration, they could feel not responsible for caring for their students or motivated to create effective instruction and curriculum (Martinez, 2019). Since the pandemic, administration and teachers teach and cater to new needs of students lost during the pandemic: considering the possibility that administration and teachers forgot the importance of school message and atmosphere in person (Martinez, 2019).

Four elementary Special Education Teachers who have been in the field for more than five years described scenarios in their profession (Bennedum, 2020). Only one out of the four participants taught at one school for over ten years. The researcher conducted a study to determine why they chose to stay. Acknowledging that the rural geographic location could play a significant role in responses due to lack of resources, salaries, and professional development, Transcendental Phenomenology was the chosen method to collect data. All questions asked participants to describe moments they felt challenged or supported in their work environment. Similar vocabulary such as data collection, IEPs,

lack of time, deadlines, professional development occurred among participants. Two out of the four participants chose a time outside of the school building when they felt supported in the profession. The significance of this study was the researcher's choice for interviewing persons in the position for more than five years (Bennedum, 2020). The researcher chose Special Education Teachers with more experience because of their experience and "established positions (Bennedum, 2020)." Roles and duties varied per Special Education Teacher due to the type of students in their classroom.

Florida's Initiatives Post COVID-19

Four hundred eighty-one students completed their teaching education programs for ESE in 2019. It is crucial to notice that the number of teachers completing an education program to become a teacher in 2018-19 was significantly lower than vacant positions for the 2020-21 school year (FLDOE, 2020). The FLDOE continued to increase initiatives to retain teacher and enhance students' learning. The FLDOE has allocated funding to increase all base salaries for teachers to $47,500 annually. Governor Ron DeSantis announced three new proposals for the teaching workforce (DeSantis Staff, 2022). Proposal one was to recruit military veterans and retired first responders to teach for two years. If the veteran and retired first responders commit to two years as a full-time teacher, a one-time bonus would be provided. Proposal two was the Teacher Apprenticeship Temporary Certification Pathway. Individuals qualified for this temporary license if applicants had an associate degree and a successful background check (DeSantis Staff, 2022). Among receiving their temporary certificate, the apprentice would co-teach with a mentor teacher and attend all trainings. After their first year, apprentice and mentor teachers would be eligible for bonuses. Proposal three included the Dual

Enrollment Educator Scholarship Program. This program provided scholarships for teachers to obtain their master's degree to teach dual-enrollment courses. Teachers who taught dual-enrollment courses would receive higher pay (Desantis Staff, 2022). These efforts by the FLDOE explicitly gave opportunities to new teachers but there was lack of information of what the FLDOE is providing to teachers who began their careers during COVID-19.

Summary

In summary, research collected provides data proving burnout among novice and veteran Special Education Teachers prior to COVID-19. Research gathered supports the shortage of Special Education Teachers in Florida and burnout existing with Special Education Teachers. The number of students choosing to complete an education program is declining. The number of students completing these programs is still significantly lower than the vacancies in Florida, which was 24.02% Special Education positions at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year (FLDOE, 2022). Only 10.18% of teachers hold correct certifications and degrees for an Exceptional Student Education classroom even though districts prefer to hire teachers that are certified in the appropriate field to ensure students receive quality instruction (FLDOE, 2022). Fully certified and uncertified veterans and novice teachers felt burnout before a declared state of emergency which required all schools to close and abruptly begin virtual instruction temporarily. There is not enough research completed to provide accurate information on why teachers are leaving the field in their first years as a teacher and explicit details on how their teaching environment after COVID-19 influenced these feelings of burnout.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There is a critical teacher shortage in Florida (FLDOE, 2022). Nearly 20% of the ESE courses available were taught by teachers who were not certified in the field (FLDOE, 2022). Early Special Education Teachers who entered the field during COVID-19 had a variety of experiences that influenced their self-efficacy. The purpose of this study was to gain insight on lived experiences of those Special Education Teacher who entered their field during COVID-19. The researcher conducted a qualitative narrative design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A qualitative narrative design allowed for the researcher to collect information in the participants field where they experienced the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were not be brought into a lab or specialized setting for this research. Participants were not required to bring or use any instruments. The researcher was the key instrument. The researcher provided open-ended questions to the participants who volunteered to participate in the interview. The researcher recorded data using two recording devices. After the researcher completed all one-on-one interviews via zoom or face-to-face. The researcher evaluated the data to determine themes and patterns.

Research Question

RQ1: What were the lived experiences of beginning Special Education Teachers that began their teaching career during COVID-19 remote learning?

Research Design

The researcher chose a qualitative narrative approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to retrieve multiple in-depth perspectives of the lives

of Early Career Special Education educators during COVID-19. The researcher used several techniques to gain participants; one was through a flyer posted on special education websites and social media accounts. Other access points were through convenient sampling and snowball sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher had several personal contacts that could assist with finding participants that fit the inclusion criteria. A narrative qualitative design allowed open-ended forms of data to be collected. By the researcher using interview open end questions, it was assumed participants would speak freely and provide multiple examples of their experiences. Participants participated in their current environment and could reflect on their current role. The researcher was aware that data collected could contain bias, but it was the researcher responsibility to complete a holistic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With open ended questions, the researcher sought to find patterns and themes from data collected.

Context/Setting of the Study

Through a flyer (Appendix A), convenient and snowball sampling, participants participated in the one-on-one interviews by zoom or face-to-face. Interviews were audio recorded using two devices. Participants reviewed the consent form and introduction. The researcher provided an introduction of themselves and the purpose. The interview will include opening and content questions. The researcher used probes to clarify a statement. The researcher provided closing instructions to the participant.

Description of Population and/or Sample

The population of this study represented Special Education Teachers who entered the field during COVID-19. The population of this study included Special Education

Teachers who have temporary and full certifications in the state of Florida. Currently, there are 4,000 Special Education Teachers in Florida (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The population of this study included Special Education Teachers who have obtained a bachelors and/or masters in the United States. The sample frame included between five and 25 participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and the researcher left the field when she met saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) or when she hears the same answers over and over. The participants met the following criteria:

1. Must have a current temporary or full certification in Special Education

2. Currently teaching Special Education in Florida

3. Previously taught Special Education in Florida

4. Must have obtained a Special Education position during COVID-19

5. Must volunteer to participate

Procedures

First, the researcher posted the flyer (Appendix A) on professional sites such as Florida CEC, and Florida CASE as well as social media sites on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The researcher also emailed (Appendix B) potential participants she knows, and other colleagues know. Once the researcher has contacted potential participants, she arranged a time and place with the participant to conduct the interview and sent the participant an email (Appendix D) with interview questions (Appendix E) and the Informed Consent (Appendix C). At the interview the researcher asked if the participant had any questions and that they signed the informed consent. Once these preliminary procedures have been completed the researcher will turned on two recording devices. If the interview was on ZOOM, the recording on ZOOM was activated and another

additional device. If the interview was in the same space the researcher activated two recording devices in case one malfunctions. After the interview the researcher transcribed using Microsoft word dictation. She then cleaned up the transcription adding pseudonyms, end marks, and paragraphs. Once this transcription clean-up was completed the researcher emailed (Appendix F) the transcript to the participant for member-checking and allowed the participant to review the transcript for accuracy. If the researcher did not hear back from the participant in one week, she assumed the transcript is accurate. She then organized it into to codes and compare to other participant's transcriptions.

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher used specific open-ended interview questions and conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The researcher followed a script (Appendix D) for all interviews. The researcher used the script to provide interview questions and to ask for clarification if needed after the participant had answered. The use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to elaborate on their experiences during COVID-19. Interview questions were broad and specific.

Instrumentation

The participants determined if they prefered in person or video conferencing taped interviews. The researcher used two devices to record the interviews. The researcher emailed (Appendix E) prior to meeting with a SurveyMonkey link with informed consent (Appendix C). The following were a list of questions for participants:

Interview Questions

Grand Tour Question: Tell me about your experience teaching special education during COVID-19.

IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote teaching?

IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained?

IQ3: Can you describe your hiring process for your first teaching position?

IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach?

IQ5: Can you describe the transition into your position (ex. Trainings, support, previous knowledge)?

IQ6: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator?

IQ7: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally?

IQ8: Can you describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction?

IQ9: Can you describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioning from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self?

IQ10: Are you motivated as an educator?

Data Analysis

The researcher used a narrative analysis to form a conclusion on the Qualitative Narrative Design. Narrative analysis allowed interview participants to tell a story or an experience. The participant interpreted their own experience and then the researcher interpreted the participant's experience. The participant's personal narratives were

transcribed to determine common themes among participants. These common themes contributed to research on lived experiences and self-efficacy during COVID-19. Then, all transcriptions from all participants were organized into to codes to generate three to five themes to tell the stories of beginning Special Education Teachers and get to the essence of their lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Risks & Benefits

All participants volunteered to participate in the study. Risks were minimal, however, if participants felt anxious, nervous, or uncomfortable reliving teaching experiences during COVID-19 may discontinue the interview and their audio-tape and informed consent would be destroyed. Participants at any time could end the interview and audio-tapes would be destroyed. There were no benefits for the participants, but participants may have provided extensive insight on their experiences and enjoy knowing they were assisting to build the body of knowledge around this topic. Participants may have discover new perspectives and thoughts on their lived experiences.

How Data will be Secured

All participants remained confidential and given a pseudonym as well as any school, student, or faculty member. All data collected electronically and physically was securely stored on a hard drive and stored in a secure location that the researcher only has access too. All data will be destroyed after three years.

Anonymity & Confidentiality

All participants remained confidential and were given a pseudonym. All data collected electronically and physically were securely stored on a hard drive and stored in

a secure location that the researcher only has access too. All data will be destroyed after three years.

Quality of Data

It is assumed that all participants volunteered to partake in the one-on-one interviews were being consistent and truthful. Interviews were conducted through zoom or face to face to ensure honesty and firsthand experiences.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

Limitations included weakness in the study that the researcher cannot control. The first limitation was the location that participants received their education degrees. Participants may have received different instruction in the college coursework than others that could affect their experiences during COVID-19. All participants who teach or taught in Florida's schools, experiences may differ or be like those teachers who taught elsewhere. The second limitation was resources, it could be evident that participants may not provide enough information due to lack of resources and experience.

Delimitations

Delimitations were choices made by the researcher. The researcher chose to interview Special Education Teachers in Florida. The researcher chose to not include general education teachers. The researcher chose to complete interviews face-to-face, zoom, or by phone. Participation was provided in a variety of platforms, so it did not limit volunteers.

Summary

The researcher conducted a qualitative narrative research design to collect lived experiences of early career special educators during COVID-19. The researcher sought to find common themes and experiences amongst educators to contribute to the knowledge of teaching experiences during COVID-19. The qualitative narrative approach allowed for open-ended questions in the participants setting. After data was collected, the researcher completed a data analysis and code all data to find patterns and themes.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

The researcher sought to uncover the lived experiences of beginning Special Education Teachers who began their career during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher provided volunteers consent forms using SurveyMonkey and a copy of the interview questions. The researcher scheduled a preferred time and place with participants to conduct the interview. The interviews were completed face-to-face or using zoom. The researcher used two recording devices to collect participants' experiences. The researcher asked participants ten questions that would provide insight to lived experiences during COVID-19.

Table 1 below describes each participant and their teaching placements.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Name	Gender	Race	Special Education Placement during COVID-19
Alex	F	White	High School Support Facilitator

Bailey	F	Hispanic	Elementary School ASD Cluster
Carol	F	White	Middle School ASD Cluster
Daisy	F	White	Elementary School ASD Cluster
Ella	F	Black	Middle School ASD Cluster
Frances	F	White	Elementary School General Education
Grace	F	White	Elementary School ASD Cluster
Hazel	F	White	Elementary School ASD Cluster
Ivy	F	White	Elementary School General Education
Jade	F	Black	High School ASD Cluster

Interview Questions

Grand Tour Question: Tell me about your experience teaching special education during

COVID-19.

IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote

teaching?

IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained?

IQ3: Can you describe your hiring process for your first teaching position?

IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach?

IQ5: Can you describe the transition into your position (ex. Training, support, previous knowledge)?

IQ6: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator?

IQ7: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally?

IQ8: Can you describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction?

IQ9: Can you describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioned from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self?

IQ10: Are you motivated as an educator?

After each interview, the researcher journaled and worked to bracket her bias and then transcribed each interview. The researcher played the audio and typed the transcription to effectively analyze participants' responses. By the 6th participant, the researcher noticed common phrases, themes, and ideas. The researcher continued until ten participants to ensure accurate evidence. The researcher noticed continued common phrases, themes, and ideas. The researcher ended the interview process at ten participants. The researcher then grouped the questions based on participant's similar experiences. The researcher created four themes based on participants' responses.

Coding Organization

The researcher created four themes based on the participant's experiences. The first theme, "winging it" was created based on responses to IQ3 and IQ5.

IQ3: Can you describe your hiring process for your first teaching position?

IQ5: Can you describe the transition into your position (ex. Training, support, previous knowledge)?

The second theme, "the struggle is real," was created based on responses to IQ6, 7, and 9.

IQ6: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator?

IQ7: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally?

IQ9: Can you describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioning from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self?

The third theme, "a mixed bag of emotions, represents the responses from IQ8.

IQ8: Can you describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction?

The last theme, "do it for the kids," represents IQ10.

IQ10: Are you motivated as an educator?

The researcher did not use questions 1,2 or 4 to create themes. IQ1,2, and 4 describe the participants.

IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote teaching?

IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained?

IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach?

Participants

Table 2 represents responses from IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote teaching? The study included ten participants that teach in South Florida. Eight participants had less than a year of experience whereas two participants had two years of experience prior to COVID-19.

Table 2 below describes each participant's length of teaching prior to COVID-19.

Table 2: Length of Teaching

Name (pseudonym)	Experience prior to COVID-19
Alex	0
Bailey	4 months
Carol	2 years
Daisy	2 months
Ella	5 months
Frances	3 weeks
Grace	0
Hazel	3 months
Ivy	2 years
Jade	0

Table 3 represents IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained? Six participants did not have a bachelor's degree in ESE but two of those participants obtained their master's in ESE. Four participants had their temporary certification which grants the participants a license to teach for 3 years. Seven participants had their professional certification which allows them to teach for 5 years. All seven participants obtained their professional license after being hired into their position. To obtain a professional certification, participants must have a degree in education, the ESE exam, and professional exam. Participants are responsible for renewing their professional license by attending professional development and implementing strategies in their environment.

Table 3 below describes participant's degrees and certifications.

Table 3: Participant's Degrees and Certifications

Name (pseudonym)	ESE Bachelor's degree	ESE Master's Degree	Temporary Certification	Professional Certification
Alex	X	X		X
Bailey	X	X		X
Carol			X	

Daisy	X	X		X
Ella				X
Frances				X
Grace		X	X	
Hazel		X	X	
Ivy	X	X		X
Jade			X	

Table 4 and 5 represent IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach? All participants taught an ESE population at the elementary, middle, or high school level. The graph below does not include all disabilities under the IDEA. The graph includes the populations stated by participants.

Table 4 below describes the population participants teach.

Table 4: Participant's population

Name (pseudonym)	ASD	SLD	IND	DD

Alex		X	X	
Bailey	X			
Carol	X			
Daisy	X			
Ella	X			
Frances		X	X	X
Grace	X			
Hazel	X			
Ivy		X	X	
Jade	X			

Seven participants taught elementary ESE students. One participant taught middle school ESE students and two participants taught high school ESE students. Six participants mentioned that their population and classroom setting changed during COVID-19 or after COVID-19. All six participants who changed their position left their school and obtained an ESE position at another school.

Table 5 below describes if participants changed positions after COVID-19.

Table 5: Participant's positions post COVID-19

Name (pseudonym)	Elementary ESE	Middle School ESE	High School ESE	Position change after or during COVID-19
Alex			X	
Bailey	X			X
Carol	X			
Daisy	X			X
Ella		X		
Frances	X			X
Grace	X			
Hazel	X			X
Ivy	X			X

Jade			X	X

Bailey, Daisy, and Hazel continued to work with elementary ESE students at a different school. Frances, Jade, and Ivy not only changed their location but also changed their ESE population. Frances and Ivy transitioned from elementary ESE to high school ESE. Jade transitioned from high school ESE to middle school ESE students.

Table 6 below describes participants who left their school after COVID-19.

Table 6: Participant's positions who changed schools post COVID-19

Name (pseudonym)	Position prior COVID-19	Position at new school during or after COVID-19
Bailey	Elementary ESE	Elementary ESE
Daisy	Elementary ESE	Elementary ESE
Frances	Elementary ESE	High School ESE
Hazel	Elementary ESE	Elementary ESE
Ivy	Elementary ESE	High School ESE
Jade	High School ESE	Middle School ESE

In summary, all participants taught in an ESE setting in South Florida. Six participants obtained a degree in education. Six participants obtained their professional certification. Seven participants teach an ASD population. Six participants' experience during COVID-19 influenced them to change positions, population, and locations.

Themes

Winging it

Winging it was created based on responses to IQ3 and 5. IQ3 asked participants to describe their hiring process for your first teaching position. According to Carol, her hiring process was quite simple; her administration told her *"We need you to be a teacher."* Frances was completing her student teaching in a general education setting where the principal said *"hey you are doing a good job; I have an open position. Why don't you fill it?"* Similar to Frances, Ivy was familiar with her school. Ivy was employed in their after-school program and the principal told her *"We need teachers. Can you help us out?"*

IQ5 asked participants to describe the transition into your position (ex. Training, support, previous knowledge). Ivy and Frances were familiar with their school because of student teaching or after school involvement. Frances said:

"I didn't know my students well. I didn't know anything about an IEP. I didn't know anything about measuring goals. I felt like I knew nothing. I was prepared to be a classroom teacher but did not know anything about teaching students with disabilities. My university did not prepare me for teaching an ESE population."

55

Carol's experience was different compared to Ivy, Frances. Carol wanted a position because of her daughter. Carol said:

"I planned to do something other than this. I have a degree in English and History. But I wanted to work in this field because I was depressed at home after my daughter was diagnosed with Aspergers. I was sleeping all day. I wouldn't even cook dinner. I learned from her and other parents who have children diagnosed with ASD."

Carol, Ivy, Frances were familiar with their settings but lacked the appropriate training, support, and knowledge forced them to "wing it." Carol, Ivy, and Frances had to act spontaneously with no preparation to teach their population.

The Struggle is Real

The "struggle is real," was created based on responses to IQ6, 7, and 9. Questions 6 and 7 asked participants to describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator and to describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally. According to Bailey,

"I was frustrated half of the time. I saw my students regressing. I wanted to do more but the principals did not have it figured out. I made visuals, schedules, and stories. I was constantly working on different ways to meet their needs."

Participants were responsible to meet their population needs in new and unique styles during remote learning along with documenting their lessons. Alex mentioned

"It was difficult. It was extra work and extra steps to achieve the goal. You're trying to do your best and the kids are not mentally there online."

Participants were responsible to upload all curriculum digitally during COVID-19. IQ9 asked participants to describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioning from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self. It is important to recognize that all participants spoke about an experience that was negative during COVID-19. All participants told a negative experience that happened with their administration. Daisy said *"The administration was friendly at first because they needed me to cover for the teacher. After I was set in my role and the teacher did not come back, I received less support, and they took advantage of me. I had more responsibilities. I left that role at that school."*

Similar to Daisy response, Hazel stated:

"I went into my first position very positively and realized that we didn't get much support at the school. It became a negative experience. Then, switching to a new school, my outlook on teaching became more positive because of the support that I received."

Participants experienced frustrating situations with their administration and recognized they needed more support and guidelines. These negative experiences led some participants to seek new positions at different schools. Participants did not choose to leave the ESE field.

Mixed Bag of Emotions

A mixed bag of emotions represents the responses from IQ8. IQ8 asked participants to describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction. Participants' settings varied from face to face or hybrid. Nine participants had hybrid settings where some students chose to come back, and other students remained virtual. Most participants had all students return to face-to-face interaction. Grace stated

"There was anxiety and fear being around the kids. We had to create a healthy and safe environment for the kids. Sitting with the kids for lunch; I had a hard time doing that. Learning about all the horror stories about COVID-19 made me want to run out of the room when a kid sneezed."

It was difficult for participants to transition back to face-to-face instruction. Some participants did not receive specific rules or guidelines to meet the needs of their students in a hybrid setting. Ella, who teaches high needs students, stated

"It was difficult. We weren't sure what to do again. Do we focus more on academics or life skills like being able to put on a mask and transitioning back to the classroom?"

Ella taught middle school ESE students who academically receive preschool instruction. Ella's instruction focuses more on life skills such as recognizing their name, safety awareness, and other skills. Eight participants had experiences like Ella and Grace transitioning back to face to face instruction. Two participants had positive experiences transitioning back to face-to-face instruction. Jade mentioned

"It was exciting. It was an adrenaline rush knowing that I was coming back. I still remember that day and telling the kids we were coming back. It was very exciting to see every student. I won't lie; I hugged a couple of students because that hug was confirmation that this was real. It was rewarding."

Based on experiences collected, the emotions varied based on the functionality of the population participants taught. Participants who worked with students who had more severe disabilities had a difficult transition back to face-to-face instruction. Participants who had students with less severe disabilities and did not have to participate in hybrid learning had a positive transition experience.

Do it for the Kids

"Do it for the kids," represents IQ10 which asked participants if they are motivated as an educator. Nine participants stated yes. One participant stated no. Ella stated

"Not really. There are a lot of things that have discouraged me from being an educator. Communication is not where it needs to be. The pay is horrible for all the work that we do. The inconsistency makes it hard to enjoy what you're doing. But I love my kids."

In contrast, Jade stated

"I am. My goal is to change at least one thing in a child. When you teach in any field of education, it has to come from the heart. There needs to be passion. If there is no real passion for it, you will keep bouncing from place to place, trying to fulfill your happiness. Little things that we don't think about make me happy."

Jade enjoys working with her population. Jade enjoys the challenge of making a difference in a child's life. Like Grace's response:

"I am motivated as an educator. We wear so many hats in this role from dusk to dawn; I'm exhausted. Our salaries do not make ends meet. But I want to provide a learning experience that is suitable and adaptable for every child."

Information collected from participants' experiences provided evidence that all participants are motivated by their student's success. Participants strived to create a safe learning environment for their students. Even though participants are motivated because of their students, some participants recognized that they are still undervalued in their role regarding support and pay.

Summary

Ten participants were audio-taped interviewed. The researcher met saturation after the sixth participant, however she continued interviewing through 10 participants. Four themes were generated from the coding: *Winging It, The Struggle is Real, A Mixed Bag of Emotions, and Do It for the Kids*. Based on participants' responses, teachers were not prepared but tried their best to the meet the needs of their students. Participants' mentalities were affected during COVID-19. All participants stated COVID-19 provided new challenges and required more adaptableness and creativity to meet their student's needs. Participants who did not think their financial, mental, and physical needs were being met, searched for alternative positions and locations. Participants who changed positions and locations did not leave the ESE field entirely. Participants who changed

positions mentioned they receive better support and work with less students who have severe disabilities.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative research study was to examine the early career Special Education Teachers experiences during COVID-19 who began teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study was aimed to provide more information to the critical teacher shortage in Florida (FLDOE, 2022). As of January 2023 there were over 6,500 teacher vacancies across the state of Florida (FLDOE Update, June 7, 2023). The stories and lived experiences of early career Special Education Teachers must be shared. The methodology chosen for this study is a qualitative narrative method. Qualitative narrative design allows the researcher to be the key instrument (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The goal of the qualitative narrative study was to provide the stories of Special Education Teachers' experiences teaching before,during, and post COVID-19. To better understand the lived experiences, the researcher created ten open ended interview questions to ask participants. Participants were recruited through social media and personal contacts. After completing the consent form and reviewing interview questions. Participants were interviewed through zoom or face-to face. Early career Special Education Teachers were asked questions related to COVID-19, their emotions, transitions, hiring process, and student population. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the researcher. This allowed the researcher to find patterns and themes shared among participants. Special Education Teachers emphasized the challenge of meeting needs during remote learning and the lack of support and guidance provided by their

administration. The experiences collected led to four themes; ***Winging It***, ***The Struggle is Real***, ***A Mixed Bag of Emotions***, and ***Do It for the Kids***. This chapter provides a summary of literature, the finding,s and importance of this study. It will provide recommendations based on the literature, theory, and evidence.

The researcher conducted a qualitative narrative design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A qualitative narrative design allowed the researcher to collect information in the participants' field where they experienced teaching during COVID-19 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study did not take place in a specialized setting and did not require any instruments. This study included ten Early Career Special Education Teachers from south Florida and the key instrument which was the researcher. The researcher provided open-ended questions to participants to gather data and determine themes. Two educators had over two years of teaching experience and eight teachers had less than five months of experience before COVID-19. Interview questions collected lived experiences from Special Education Teachers where their self-efficacy was challenged or thriving. Five out of the ten Special Education Teachers were hired into their position from recognition in previous position in the school. The school administration vocalized their need for them to fill an empty classroom position. Through this research, the lived experiences of educators who work with students with disabilities were examined and how they adapted to remote learning, hybrid, and transitioning back to face-to-face instruction. Special Education teachers expressed their feelings about COVID-19 and the effect COVID-19 had on them mentally and physically. All participants expressed that remote learning was challenging and stressful. Nine out ten participants stated transitioning back to face to face was difficult.One participant described smooth transitioning back to face-to-face

learning.Information collected influences the researcher to create four themes: winging it, a mixed bag of emotions, the struggle is real, and do it for the kids. The objective of this qualitative research study was to gain insight into early career Special Education Teachers' lived experiences.

Themes

The researcher created four themes based on their experiences. The four themes are ***Winging It***, ***The Struggle is Real***, ***a Mixed Bag of Emotions***, and ***Do It For the Kids***. ***Winging it*** describes participants' hiring process and transition into the position. Information collected by participants support that participants were employed in other positions or completing their student teaching. Some participants were praised by their efforts in non-ESE settings and asked if they would like to fill a position. One participant mentioned continued support by administration after they were hired. All participants had to "wing it" because of the lack of knowledge and support. The ***Struggle is Real*** represents the mental and physical challenges participants faced during COVID-19. All participants felt frustrated and defeated during COVID-19. All participants stated that they were unable to meet the needs of their students. All participants except for one participant mentioned the transition back to face-to-face instruction was difficult because of hybrid and the regression. ***A Mixed Bag of Emotions*** described the fluctuating emotions participants had returning to face-to-face intrusion. Participants who transitioned from remote learning to face to face had a better experience than those teachers who experienced face to face instruction to hybrid instruction. ***Do it for the kids*** described the motivation all participants have as an educator. Almost all participants were

motivated in their field because of the kids but participants still recognized they are undervalued and underpaid.

Discussion

Research collected provides data proving burnout among novice and veteran Special Education Teachers prior to COVID-19. Research gathered supports the shortage of Special Education Teachers in Florida and burnout existing with Special Education Teachers. The aim of this study was to find commonalities among Early Career Special Education teachers during COVID-19. There were 24.02% Special Education positions vacant at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year (FLDOE, 2022). Also, 10.18% of Special Education positions were employed by an educator who was not certified (FLDOE, 2022). There was not enough research completed to provide accurate information on why teachers are leaving the field in their first years as a teacher and explicit details on how their teaching environment after COVID-19 influenced these feelings of burnout. This study provided experiences that showed teachers were not happy and frustrated during COVID-19. Five out of the ten teachers made a career change during COVID-19. The results indicated that teachers cared for their student population and wanted to see success with academic and life skills, but it was not easy. Teachers felt that remote learning made teaching content and collecting data more challenging. The results show that responses were similar to previous studies completed prior to COVID-19 (Bussey, 2020)(Mrstik et al., 2019). Special Education Teachers felt unprepared who lacked experience. Special Education Teachers needed more support from administration (Scott, 2019).

Implications for Practice

This study illuminated the lack of training of these early career Special Education Teachers. While they wanted to provide pedagogically sound virtual classrooms for their students with disabilities, they had little training in providing strong instruction in a virtual environment. The lack of mentorship when teaching was also evident, and many of these participants had little to no support from veteran Special Education Teachers at their schools, let alone no support from administration. When teachers and students came back to their schools emphasis was placed on the students' wellbeing, when there should have also been wellness support for the teachers. The student gap in knowledge was wide, and there was not a plan to close that learning loss gap. Students in these participants' classes still struggle with being on schedules of a normal school day as most of these students were void of school structure for almost two years. These participants have struggled with getting students back into school routines. There is an even greater shortage of teachers after the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a 200% increase in teacher retirements and change of career from 2018 to 2022. In January 2023, the middle of the school year, the Florida Department of Education recorded 5,294 teacher vacancies. This vacancy number is up from 2000 at the same time in 2022 (FLDOE, 2023). Florida teacher salary numbers have not increased for over ten years.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are given based on the results of this study.

1. Adequate salary should be given to teachers - support legislation to increase beginning salaries to over $65,000 (DeLisa, 2023).

2. Rewards or other incentives should be used for teacher performance

3.   Early Career Teachers should receive more mandated specific targeted professional development for the first three years of their career

4.   Expectations for Early Career Special Education Teachers should be clear and based on their population needs

5.   Early Career Teachers should receive an up to date first year guide through social media

6.   Mentor program that teaches the same population

7. Weekly Sticky Note guide for Early Career Special Education Teachers

Limitations

The limitation of this practice was that participants were from South Florida. Also, the study only included Early Career Special Education Teachers. The researcher interviewed a convenient sample in the special education field. It is possible that interviewees could have answered questions how they assumed the researcher would like as they know the researcher.

The researcher is also an early career Special Education Teacher, while she did her best to remain neutral with all participants.

Summary

The conclusion of this study is that Early Career Special Education teachers love their students but seek for more financial security, administrative support and guidance, and recognition. All participants considered remote learning to be a challenge because of the lack of communication, technology, and support. All participants noted the regression they saw in the population that they taught. Recommendations are supported by the four themes created by participants' responses. Based on participants' responses, early career

Special Education Teachers feel undervalued and unable to do their job to the fullest due to lack of support and prior knowledge. This study provides more information on the beginning lived experiences of Special Education Teachers during COVID-19 and recommendations to support Early Career Special Education Teachers. It is recommended to further investigate unprepared Special Education Teachers to veteran Special Education Teachers. It is possible that early career Special Education Teachers doubt their talents and excel in the classroom. Based on responses, teachers could benefit from a weekly sticky note that can be accessed in person or social media and updated weekly to alleviate stress, fear, and doubt.

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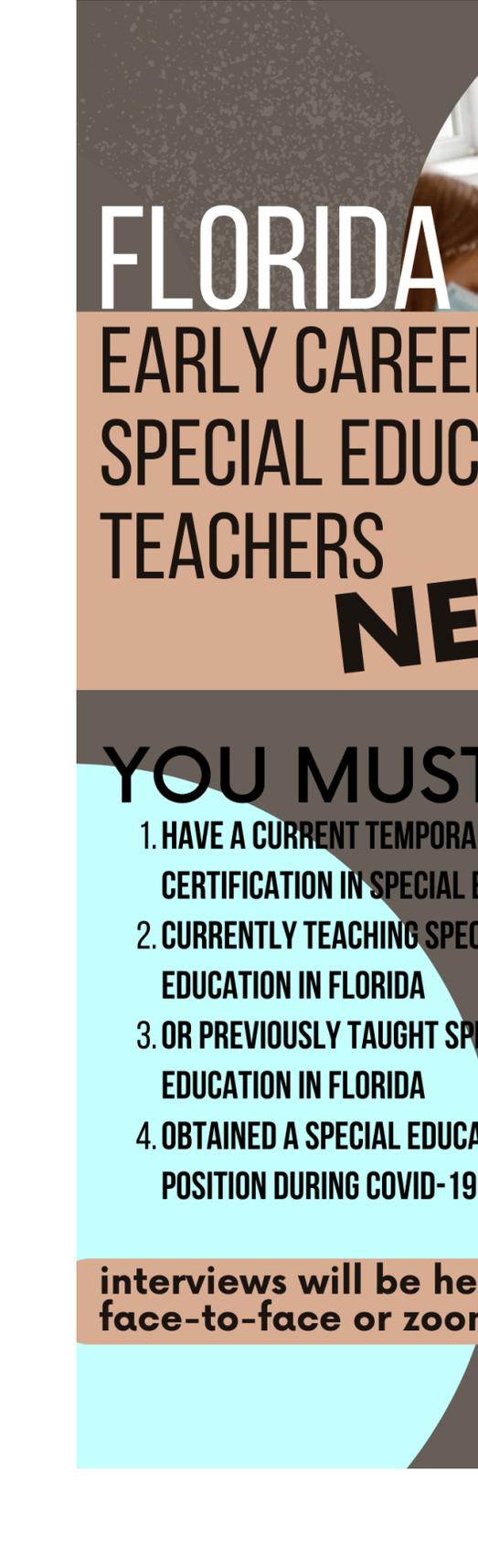
FLORIDA
EARLY CAREER SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS NEEDED!

YOU MUST:

1. HAVE A CURRENT TEMPORARY OR FULL CERTIFICATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION
2. CURRENTLY TEACHING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN FLORIDA
3. OR PREVIOUSLY TAUGHT SPECIAL EDUCATION IN FLORIDA
4. OBTAINED A SPECIAL EDUCATION POSITION DURING COVID-19

interviews will be held face-to-face or zoom

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING IN A STUDY?

JANUARY 2023

PLEASE CONTACT SYDNEY PARKS

+757-710-8377

sparks2@email.lynn.edu

APPENDIX B: Emails to gain study/participant entry

Good morning,

My name is Sydney Parks. I am completing a study on Early Career Special Education Teacher Lived Experiences During COVID-19. I am seeking to gather information on Special Education Teachers who entered the field during COVID-19. I hope to find common themes and experiences amongst educators to contribute to the knowledge of teaching experiences during COVID-19. I am looking for participants who volunteer to participate in an open-ended question interview in January 2023. If you are interested, please contact me at sparks2@email.lynn.edu or 757-710-8377.

APPENDIX C: INFORMED Consent Forms

I, _____, agree to participate in a study led by Sydney Parks. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation. I understand that I am participating in this audio-taped study voluntarily. I understand that there is no explicit influence to participate. My participation includes answering a series of open-ended questions. I acknowledge that my name, employer, school, and students will remain confidential. I will be given a pseudonym as well as any names of schools, faculty, and students. All data collected electronically and physically will be securely stored on a hard drive and stored in a secure location that the researcher only has access too. All data will be destroyed after three years by the researcher. It is possible that I may feel a variety of emotions as I describe my experience as an Early Career Special Education Educator. I understand that at any time I would like to no longer participate in the survey; I may end the interview and the researcher will destroy all audio-tapes and other evidence. Any questions can also be directed to Dr. Jennifer Lesh, Dissertation Chair at jlesh@lynn.edu or the Lynn University Institutional Review Board Chair, Dr. Jennifer Lesh at jlesh@lynn.edu.

I have read and understand all information provided above and have been given a copy of my consent form by the researcher.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

_____   _____

Researcher's Signature   Date

Interview Questions

Grand Tour Question: Tell me about your experience teaching special education during COVID-19.

IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote teaching?

IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained?

IQ3: Can you describe your hiring process for your first teaching position?

IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach?

IQ5: Can you describe the transition into your position (ex. Trainings, support, previous knowledge)?

IQ6: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator?

IQ7: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally?

IQ8: Can you describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction?

IQ9: Can you describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioning from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self?

IQ10: Are you motivated as an educator?

APPENDIX E: EMAIL WITH QUESTIONS AND LINK TO INFORMED

CONSENT

Thank you so much for submitting your interest to participate in the study. The interview will be conducted by me (Sydney Parks) via zoom or face to face during January of 2023. Please complete the consent form and pick two dates and times that can work for you on the form provided https://forms.gle/EJUVnXzDCZdJ4qef7

Below are the questions I will be asking you during the interview.

Grand Tour Question: Tell me about your experience teaching special education during COVID-19.

IQ1: How long were you a Special Education Teacher before you had to go to remote teaching?

IQ2: What degrees and certifications have you obtained?

IQ3: Can you describe your hiring process for your first teaching position?

IQ4: Can you describe the population you teach?

IQ5: Can you describe the transition into your position (ex. Trainings, support, previous knowledge)?

IQ6: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on your role as an educator?

IQ7: Can you describe the effect of COVID-19 on yourself physically and mentally?

IQ8: Can you describe the transition back to face-to-face instruction?

IQ9: Can you describe a time in your early career where your emotions transitioning from positive to negative or negative to positive about your environment and self?

IQ10: Are you motivated as an educator?

APPENDIX F: EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS TO REVIEW TRANSCRIPT

(Name),

Thank you for participating in the study. I have attached a transcript for your review. Just a reminder, your name and location will remain confidential. You have two weeks to address any concerns or questions you may have regarding the transcript. If I do not hear back from you, it is assumed you agree with the transcript.

Thank you,

Sydney Parks

Institutional Review Board
3601 North Military Trail
Boca Raton, FL 33433
T: 561-237-7012
561-237-7000 | lynn.edu
Jennifer J. Lesh, Ph.D., IRB Chair

DATE: 3/09/2023
TO: Sydney Parks
FROM: Jennifer Lesh
PROJECT NUMBER: 22.15
PROTOCOL TITLE: *Early Career Special Education Teacher Lived Experiences*

PROJECT TYPE: New Project
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: 3/09/2023
EXPIRATION DATE: 3/08/2024

Thank you for your submission for this research study. The Lynn University IRB has APPROVED your NEW Project. This approval is in accordance with 45 CFR §46.111 Criteria for IRB approval of research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

It is important that you retain this letter for your records and present upon request to necessary parties.

- This approval is valid for one year. **IRB Form 4: Application to Continue (Renew) a Previously Approved Project** will be required prior to the expiration date if this project continues beyond one year.
- Please note that any revision to previously approved materials or procedures must be approved by the IRB29 before it is initiated. Please submit **IRB Form 5 Application for Procedural Revisions of or Changes in Research Protocol and/or Informed Consent Form 1 of a Previously Approved Project** for this procedure.
- All serious and unexpected adverse events must be reported to the IRB. Please use **IRB Form 6 Report of Unexpected Adverse Event, Serious Injury or Death** for this procedure.
- At the completion of your data collection, please submit **IRB Form 8 IRB Report of Termination of Project.**

If you have any questions or comments about this correspondence, please contact the chair of the Lynn University IRB, Jennifer Lesh (jlesh@lynn.edu).

Dr. Jennifer J. Lesh, Institutional Review Board Chair
Institutional Review Board
Lynn University
3601 North Military Trail
Boca Raton, FL 33433
T: 561-237-7012
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