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The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic On Special Education Teachers and IEP Coordinators In a Vermont Middle School

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Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic has greatly impacted the education system for the past two years. COVID-19 has undoubtedly impacted students of all ages–researchers have reported an increase in mental health issues, violence, and misbehavior, as well as loss of instructional time (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). However, research investigating how Special Education Classrooms have been impacted is limited. Thus, this research proposal aims to assess how Special Education teachers and IEP coordinators have been impacted by the pandemic, a phenomenon that has been studied in multiple peer-reviewed journal articles but has not been studied in-depth in Vermont or at the Middle-Level. Special Education and/or IEP Coordinators from three different middle schools will be interviewed about how they have been impacted by the pandemic. The researcher will compare the participants' answers and note how often certain themes are present during the three interviews. Participants have reported increased stress, an inability to meet students' needs, struggles and solutions with technology, and the discovery of new forms of communication. They also emphasized the importance of proper funding, administrator support, and general educator cooperation.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted people all over the world, particularly students. Students were forced out of their classrooms and onto virtual platforms. Research has found that the pandemic has increased mental health issues, violence, and misbehavior. The pandemic has also lessened instructional time (Kuhfeld, et al., 2022). Special Education classrooms have also been affected by the pandemic. As a future teacher, understanding how students have been impacted by the pandemic is pivotal.

The research the author will be conducting will offer future teachers information on how future students were impacted by the pandemic. As mentioned previously, there has already been research conducted that confirms students have been impacted by their time online and in quarantine. Students with disabilities are no exception. Inclusion is becoming an increasingly popular strategy– meaning students with disabilities are likely going to be included in general education classrooms. To teach *all* their students effectively, teachers must know how *all* their students have been impacted by the pandemic—whether it be positive or negative impacts or both. It will be helpful if teachers understand and are prepared to address how Special Education classrooms have been impacted by COVID-19. Therefore, the author poses the following research question: "How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Special Education teachers and/or IEP Coordinators in a Middle School in Vermont?"

Literature Review

For the proposed study, the potential effects of the pandemic on Special Education classrooms will be investigated. It was anticipated that there would be limited research addressing this topic. However, when examining the existing literature, it was discovered that more attention has been given to the topic than assumed. There was a modest amount of literature, though much of it was not based in Vermont or the United States. It is speculated that more research on this topic is in progress. The author was able to find several published, peer-reviewed studies that relate to the proposed topic. These studies informed the hypothetical proposal. The studies addressed in the literature review used similar investigation strategies and found similar outcomes: increased stress, an inability to meet students' needs, struggles and solutions with technology, and the discovery of new forms of communication. These studies will be used as a starting point to explain the parameters of the author's proposed research.

In her study, *Special Education Teachers' use of technologies during the COVID-19 ERA (spring 2020—Fall 2021),* Mary F. Rice explored the ways in which special education teachers used various technologies during the pandemic. The purpose of the study was to learn from special education teachers who were striving to ensure that their students would continue to benefit from instruction via various technologies, despite the shifting instructional strategies due to the pandemic.

The participants in this study were four special education teachers who taught kindergarten, grade 3, grade 6, and grade 10. During the interviews, the researcher asked clarifying questions to keep the participants' attention on the research questions and to help them explain their reasoning. When the pandemic led to the nationwide shutdown and the closing of

schools, the researcher began meeting with the participants via video conference or phone conversation. All the participants had one in-person interview with the researcher.

Rice found that during the initial shutdown, special educators were unprepared, and their students were impacted by a very restrictive environment. Special educators prioritized communicating with parents when assignments were due through email, text and phone conversations, video conferences, and 6-foot-apart in-person meetings. Students also met with their teachers through video conferences, but they were often disengaged. Some of the participants used social media platforms to increase student engagement. During the extended online learning period, the researcher found that students began using multiple platforms– email, text and phone conversations, video conference, 6-foot apart in-person meetings, etc... – to communicate. One of the participants began to open the video conference 10 minutes early and for 1 hour on the weekend to allow students to communicate with the teacher and each other. Family members who took an interest in the online synchronous lessons were encouraged to participate. However, it was also found that many learners were not attending remote classes. The participants tried to solve this problem by offering families more resources and options, such as going to the public library for WiFi.

Rice also found that teachers were the most stressed during the concurrent learning period. Due to having half of the class in-person and the other half online, teachers were more focused on keeping their students busy, instead of meeting their needs. When schools transitioned back into full-time in-person learning, the participants stopped using various technologies. For example, teachers returned to email as their primary form of communication. Video conferences and online attendance were canceled. However, some pandemic technologies, such as educational videos, have become a permanent part of the classroom.

The takeaway from this study was that special education teachers had to do a significant amount of adapting to ensure that their students continued to benefit from instruction. They used various techniques such as email, text and phone conversations, and video conferences. When students began returning to in-person learning, several technologies were discarded, and several were kept. The strengths of this journal include extended fieldwork, low-inference descriptors, and data triangulation. The limitations of this study include a small participant group. The location of where this study took place was also never mentioned, which instills uncertainty within readers. The location is an important feature to mention because many areas within the United States and around the World dealt with education during the pandemic very differently. A follow-up study could include looking closer into the connections between what students with disabilities needed to learn in the various modalities and their understanding of their obligations and goals.

Another study that was reviewed was, *Is Special Education Funding Immune to COVID-19? Challenges Facing State and Local Special Education Leaders and Strategies to Mitigate the Pandemic's Impact*, by Menlove Doutre and Willis. In this study, the authors examined classroom-based early childhood educators' experiences delivering remote services to children with disabilities and their families. The participants were asked the following questions: "1. How did early childhood personnel provide remote services to young children with disabilities during the early months of the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic? 2. What went well regarding the delivery of remote services to young children with disabilities during the early months of the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic? 3. What was challenging about delivering remote services to young children with disabilities during the early months of the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic?" (Menlove Doutre & Willis, 2021). The purpose of the

study was to gain insight into the experiences of early childhood personnel during the beginning of the pandemic.

There were 221 participants involved in this study. All the participants were special education teachers or provided related services in early childhood classrooms. The participants were from twenty-one different states in the United States. The average number of years participants worked in their field was 13.67 years and the average number of years they worked in their position was 6.51 years. The researchers used a mixed-methods study. The quantitative portion was descriptive, and the qualitative portion was phenomenological. The data was gathered through surveys.

The researchers found that teachers provided remote special education services to students with disabilities. However, there were changes in hours and types of services provided. 8.5% of the survey results indicated that online education services were being properly provided according to the students' IEPs. 16.99% of participants stated that teachers and related personnel were only providing support when it was needed. 1.74% declared that students with disabilities were not receiving any individualized services. When asked if IEP service minutes were being followed, 53.77% of participants said they were not being followed, 28.30% said they were being followed, and 17.29% said they did not know. It was also found that some adjustments were made to students' IEPs. Some adjustments include a reduction in service minutes, prioritizing goals, and putting progress monitoring on hold or relying on families for information. Accommodations were provided through Google Classroom, Zoom, and Class Dojo.

The researchers also collected information on how the pandemic impacted special education teachers and related personnel. The benefits included: better relationships with

families and more individualized services, most students were able to transition to an online environment well, improved teaming and collaboration, and the creation and use of online IEP meetings. On the other hand, the quality of services was not the same when provided online. Students' needs were not met, there were no in-person interactions, and not all families were able to provide the same quality of services. It was found that there was an increase in financial, work, pandemic, and family-related stress. Educators' and service providers' lack of prior knowledge and experiences with technology made their transition to online learning difficult. There were technology issues as well, both for teachers and families.

The takeaway from this study is that while the pandemic had many negative impacts on early special education teachers, personnel, and families, there were some benefits as well. Another takeaway is that teachers, service providers, and families should have access to basic technology, sufficient internet, cell phone data plans, etc… for online learning to succeed. This journal's strengths include a large number of participants from a range of ages and locations. There were also various strategies used to ensure that the results were credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable. For example, there is an audit trail for coding, the percentage agreement was high– 94-97%– and it was peer-reviewed. The study had methodological limitations. There was no existing measure of collecting special educators' and service providers' perceptions of service delivery during the pandemic. Therefore, there is no way to test the readability or validity of the surveys. Another limitation was that participants chose to fill out the survey. There are other personnel who did not fill out the survey because they had no energy, time, or proper access to the internet. Lastly, only twenty-eight states were represented. The states that were not represented might have had different responses to the survey questions. A follow-up study could include releasing a survey that receives data from all fifty states.

Lastly, the study, *Remote delivery of services for young children with disabilities during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States,* by Steed, Phan, Leech, and Charlifue-Smith was reviewed. This study investigated public education funding and special education funding during COVID-19. They also examined how the Great Recession impacted schools. The following four research questions are addressed in the journal: "1. Which IDEA fiscal requirements are potentially impacted by COVID-19? 2. What special education funding challenges are state and local special education leaders facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic? 3. What can we learn about special education funding solutions from current state guidance and the Great Recession? 4. How can state and district special education leaders address challenges and continue to improve outcomes for students with disabilities?"

The participants were four special education directors who were selected from four different geographic regions to represent states with different population sizes. All the directors have worked in their positions for at least 3 years, so they would have prior knowledge of fiscal questions before the pandemic. The interviews were informal, and the participants were asked which fiscal challenges they had at the state and district level.

Along with conducting interviews, the researchers looked at the U.S. Department of Education's IDEA fiscal requirements and questioned how applicable the requirements were during the pandemic. Each state's education website was reviewed. The researchers recorded the level of guidance on targeted topics; state financial support (MFS), local educational agency (LEA), maintenance of effort (MOE), use of CARES Act funding, and compensatory services. To explore how the Great Recession impacted special education funding, the researchers conducted a literature review.

The major findings in this study were: the transition to online learning led to gaps in service delivery and a decrease in special education services; state and federal special education funds were underutilized and there was a decline in spending on services like specialized therapies and one-on-one paraprofessionals; IEP teams were told to wait to make decisions about compensatory services and to collect information about students' learning loss until school resumed; and states' websites lacked detailed guidance. For example, only 14% of states' websites had detailed guidance on LEA MOE and how it has been impacted by COVID-19. When collecting data about the impacts of the Great Recession, the researchers found that districts that rely heavily on state funding are more affected by recessions. Reductions in state education budgets reduced student achievement and college attendance rates. Students in high-poverty school districts were disproportionately affected.

To combat these negative impacts, the researchers recommended making IDEA fiscal requirements more flexible and investing in recovery and economic aid funds that consider student needs. The strengths of this journal include extended fieldwork, low-inference descriptors, data triangulation, methods triangulation, and investigator triangulation. Data was collected from interviews, documents, and a literature review. The limitations of this journal include a small number of participants. Only four state special education directors were interviewed. 4 states cannot represent all of the United States. A follow-up study could be continuing research now that we are coming out of the pandemic. It would also be beneficial if there were more state special education directors interviewed.

All of the discussed studies examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Special Education personnel. The first and second articles had interesting similarities. Both had a participant pool involving special education teachers and found that the pandemic had negative

and positive impacts on special education teachers. The discovered negative impacts included increased stress, an inability to meet students' needs, and a lack of student engagement. The beneficial outcomes include new strategies to engage students while teaching, better communication with families, and the creation of new communication strategies, such as email, phone conversations, text conversations, and video conferences.

The third article took a different approach and discussed the financial impacts of COVID-19. This was interesting to learn about because funding impacts a district's quality of resources as well as its access to said resources. Lastly, funding should consider students' needs and socioeconomic background because students who live in a lower socioeconomic school district are more likely to be impacted by economic recessions.

Method

Participants

Three participants were interviewed for this study. The researcher recruited the participants through email. The participants were required to have worked as a Special Educator or IEP Coordinator for at least 2 years. This requirement allowed the participants to have experience working with students with special needs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were the three special educators employed at Downtown Middle School. This school was chosen based on its location and population. Downtown is the most densely populated city in the state of Vermont. Despite Downtown only being 1.4 square miles, 152 students attend Downtown Middle School (Downtown Middle School, 2022). Downtown is also a diverse city with a high number of students with IEPs and 504s. The Middle School has a student minority enrollment of 68%. The student ethnic distribution at Downtown Middle School

is 32.2% White, 28.3% Black or African American, 21.1% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 12.5 % two or more races, and 5.9% Hispanic/Latino (U.S. News & World Report L.P, 2022). 31.4% have IEPs and 2.6% have 504s. The Vermont average percentage of students with IEPs is 15%. The Vermont average percentage of students with 504s is 5.5% (Downtown School District, 2021). There are seventeen full-time teachers–three of whom are special educators–and the student-to-teacher ratio is 9:1 (U.S. News & World Report L.P, 2022).

Design and Materials

This study was a Phenomenological research project. The researcher's goal was to describe the "essence" of the COVID-19 pandemic, through the experiences of Vermont Middle School Special Educators and IEP Coordinators. A small number of participants were involved, and they explained their experiences through extensive and prolonged interviews (Hurley, 2022). Interviews were used to collect data because they allow for more in-depth answers than other methods, such as a survey. More in-depth answers allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the context of the situation. Interviews also gave the participants more time to explain their answers to questions.

The researcher was interested in how Special Education Teachers and IEP Coordinators in a Vermont Middle School were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher measured the variables by looking for themes that indicate increased stress, an inability to meet students' needs, struggles and solutions with tech, and new forms of communication. Some of these themes might include stress, frustration, struggle, success, technology, adaptation, etc.… The researcher compared the participants' answers and noted how often the themes were present across the three interviews. The differences in interview discussions and the types of themes

allowed the researcher to compare how different special educators have been impacted by COVID-19.

A computer or another technological device was used to conduct the interviews between the researcher and the participants. All the interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom. The researcher had the participants verbally consent to be recorded and transcribed. The researcher also had access to a list of questions that they asked the participants. The questions being asked will be expanded upon in the procedure section. Lastly, the researcher had a pen and paper where they took notes on the participants' answers to questions.

Procedure

The interviews were conducted on predetermined dates when the participants and the researcher were available. The interviews were planned to last for around 45 minutes per participant. The interviews were administered virtually over Zoom. The researcher provided the participants with the link to the Zoom meeting. Once the researcher and the participant were on the call together, the researcher asked the participant if they consented to be recorded and transcribed. After the participant allowed the researcher to begin recording, they began asking the participant the following questions:

Question 1: How long have you been a Special Education teacher or IEP Coordinator? What has your experience been like as a Special Education teacher or IEP Coordinator?

Question 2: How has the pandemic impacted your ability to teach and/or coordinate IEP meetings?

Question 3: Did the pandemic have any positive impacts? Negative?

Question 4: What challenges do you face as a Special Education teacher or IEP Coordinator?

Question 5: In what ways have you supported students with disabilities during the pandemic?

Question 6: In what ways do you think school administrators can support students with disabilities?

Question 7: How do you think Vermont schools handled the pandemic?

Question 8: How do you think the state of Vermont can support students with disabilities and special education teachers?

These questions were chosen because they identified how long the participants have worked in their profession, how the pandemic has impacted them in positive and negative ways, and how participants have overcome the challenges made by the pandemic and nationwide quarantine. The final questions also gave the participants the opportunity to identify ways school administrators and the state of Vermont can support them and their students in the future. The researcher took notes as the participants answered the questions. The researcher also allowed the participants to take as much time as they needed to fully answer each question. After the participants answered all the questions, the researcher asked them if there was anything they would like to add to any of their answers. The researcher also asked if the participant wanted to reread the discussion questions. The researcher gave the participants time to think and to add to their answers if they chose to. After the participants said that they had nothing else to add, the researcher thanked them for their time and ended the recording. The participant left the meeting and the researcher ended the Zoom call. The researcher coded the participants' answers by using Apriori Coding and In Vivo Coding. The researcher used these forms of coding because they are used by beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code. Apriori Codes are codes that are determined before current data is examined (San Jose State University, 2024) The predetermined

codes included: stress, frustration, struggle, success, technology, and adaptation. In Vivo Coding is used in studies that prioritize the participants' voices (Saldaña, 2022). The researcher also used In Vivo Coding because there were results in the data that were not included in the A Priori Codes. The findings were also peer-reviewed by the members of the researcher's advisory board.

Hypothesized Results

The researcher predicted that the results of this study will be that the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased stress, an inability to meet students' needs, struggles and solutions with technology, and the discovery of new forms of communication. The researcher expected to see increased stress because of the findings in the researcher's literature review; all the participants reported increased stress– familial, work-related, financial, etc.– during the pandemic. "Is Special Education Funding Immune to COVID-19? Challenges Facing State and Local Special Education Leaders and Strategies to Mitigate the Pandemic's Impact," reported that only 8.5% of its 221 population reported that students' needs were being properly met during the pandemic (Menlove Doutre, S., & Willis, J., 2021). It was likely that Vermont Special Educators and IEP Coordinators also struggled with meeting their students' needs. Technology was both a blessing and a curse. Technology allowed educators to meet with and continue instructing their students while in quarantine. Despite that, technology can be fickle. In the literature review, many participants reported their own struggles with technology as well as their students' families' struggles. Lastly, the researcher expected to find more forms of communication. Special Educators and IEP Coordinators needed to find new ways to communicate with families during the pandemic. Some of these forms of communication included email, physical letters, 6-foot-apart in-person meetings, text and phone calls, and video conferences.

However, some of these hypothesized results differed across participants. Technology and technology-based communication, for example, might have been more of a problem in a rural environment. Students might not have had access to the internet, which meant they would not be able to continue their schooling throughout the pandemic and educators would have trouble communicating with the family. That could also be the case for low-income urban families.

Results and Analysis

Positive Impacts

Accessibility through Technology

Technology had a positive impact. The three participants said technology made aspects of their jobs, such as IEP meetings, easier. Technological tools like phone calls, texting, emails, Google Chat, Google Meet, and Zoom opened up more channels of communication. Google Chat and Google Meet were resources that the participants used to communicate with families without using their personal devices. Participant 1 explained that the new forms of communication, texting, for example, led to more frequent and reliable channels to connect.

They reported that meeting virtually was more convenient for families. That convenience has continued through the pandemic and into the present. Participant 2 said that discovering new ways to communicate “made it more accessible for some families.” Participant 2 also explained that there are many factors, such as childcare and transportation, that can make it hard for guardians to make it into the building for IEP meetings.

Participant 3 explained that IEP meetings have gotten easier to run during and after the pandemic. They questioned if Zoom would have been a possibility if the pandemic never happened. They said that signatures have been traditionally needed at the end of meetings, but the pandemic has loosened that rule. Now Special Educators can record who was present for the

meeting and have the guardians fill out a consent form that will be mailed back. Participant 3 continued, stating that they "hope that we are allowed to continue to host meetings for those who need it on Google Meet or Zoom."

The participants didn't only use technology to communicate with guardians, they also used it to check in on their students. This allowed them to build and maintain relationships. This will be expanded upon in the "*New Forms of Communication and Relationship Building*" section.

Increased Flexibility

The ability to complete IEP meetings online led to a more flexible schedule. According to the participants, increased flexibility was a benefit because it made IEP meetings easier to schedule. Families often lead busy lives and do not have a lot of time to drop by the school for an in-person meeting. Factors like childcare, transportation, job schedules, etc., can make it difficult for guardians to attend in-person IEP meetings. Special Educators are busy as well. Due to the limited number of Special Educators, all of the participants have many students with disabilities on their caseload. Conducting an IEP meeting online and the increased flexibility was beneficial for them as well and allowed them to spend more time with students.

New forms of Communication and Relationship Building

Working as a Special Educator during the pandemic consisted of regular, consistent family communication. This communication could be done in a variety of ways: email, phone calls, video chats, texting, etcetera. Participant 1 explained that this communication could be as simple as texting a guardian–or the student themself–to make sure everyone was up and ready for classes. Despite this being seen as something simple, it went a long way. Participant 1 stated that this constant communication, "helped make them [the students] feel like they belonged, that

there was a support system for them during a time, where you're quite disconnected with the rest of the world."

Participant 2 said that they spent time with parents, validating their fears and feelings. Some Special Educators had families as well and were trying to work during lockdown while also caring for their families. The bonds created during the pandemic were strong and led to a greater appreciation of teachers and all of the work that they do.

As mentioned previously, Special Educators made their relationships with students with disabilities their priority. As stated by Participant 3:

> we…prioritized our relationships with the students rather than fully academics because academics weren't getting across so that when they did come back, they would be able to have a relationship with us and we can help them get them back to where they were.

Their rationale was that relationships were more important than academics because academics could be made up as long as there is a strong relationship in place. Teaching academics over a screen was incredibly difficult. Instead of putting all of their time and effort into something that would not be absorbed, the participants focused on building trust so they would be able to make more progress once their students returned to school. If they had no relationship with their students, the students would have struggled even more upon returning to school.

New Teaching Strategies

Despite relationship building and constant communication being their main goal, the participants did not give up on teaching academics. They created and experimented with new teaching strategies during the pandemic. For example, they worked with general education teachers to differentiate. This would have taken the form of adding more visual things, making

assignments shorter, ensuring that there were sentence starters for certain students, teaching students voice-to-text or text-to-speech software, providing options to listen instead of read, as well as the ability to express themselves and what they've learned with their voices. Creating these differentiated lesson plans meant working closely with each general educator. Sometimes these differentiated plans would be for the whole class, but other times they would be for individual students; it depended on the general educator they were working with.

Similar to many schools all over the country, the participants' school used a pod system. In a pod system, students were organized into small groups that would be based in the same classroom all day. The teachers would move between the classrooms instead of the students changing classrooms. Participant 1 reported that some of their students with trauma "really thrived in those small groups all day and not changing classes and having the same predictable teachers every day."

Negative Impacts

More Hands-on-Deck - Mental Health Professionals

One of the major points all of the participants touched upon was a need for more mental health professionals. During and after the pandemic, the participants noted a rise in mental health issues among the students. Despite the rise in the need for mental health professionals, the number of them has dwindled. They reported having one mental health professional and one guidance counselor for the whole middle school–152 students. Participant 1 expanded upon their feelings about this, stating:

> "I feel like my job has shifted since the pandemic, I've become a Special Educator, and a social worker, almost, which I'm not qualified to do, and I'm not qualified to be a

therapist, but I don't have to learn some of the skills and support students. We need more therapy for students."

Participant 2 said that DCF (the Vermont Department for Children and Families) has a smaller capacity. Special Educators are not qualified to be mental health professionals or social workers. All of the participants expressed worry for their students' mental health needs and they felt that their students' needs were not being met during the pandemic.

Participant 1 speculated the reason behind the low numbers of mental health professionals and social workers might be burnout or low pay.

More Hands-on-Deck - Substitutes

Similar to many schools all over the country, the participants discussed the substitute crisis in their schools. Schools have been struggling to find a proper amount of substitutes. Participant 1 said that the process of finding substitutes can be difficult. They said a long-term substitute turned down the position for another district because of pay.

More Hands-on-Deck - Special Educators

As mentioned previously, the participants are all active Special Education teachers. They work together at the same school in Northern Vermont. The school that they work at has 152 students, 34% of whom have IEPs or 504s. All of the participants mentioned feeling spread thin and not having enough time with the students or pushing into classrooms.

Less Personal

While communicating online was more accessible, it also came with some drawbacks. The participants expressed their unease about meeting with families over video chats and phone calls. It felt less personal. Not being in the same room as families while discussing their child was difficult. Not being able to make eye contact, not knowing if the guardians were present or

listening, and not being able to show how much the participants cared about their students made them feel detached–like they were speaking to no one.

Participant 2 said that some barriers were made worse by interpreters. They said that being in the same room as guardians with an interpreter was different–they were able to build better relationships by making eye contact, expressing their care for the guardian(s)'s student, ensuring guardians that they are on the same team, and by proving they know and want what's best for the student. Participant 2 said that it was very hard to build strong relationships with guardians over a screen when someone else was interpreting your words.

Increased Number of Disabilities and Mental Health Illnesses

In the "*Mental Health Professionals*" section, it was stated that the participants noticed an increase in disabilities and mental health issues. The pandemic was a traumatic experience for many people all over the globe. That trauma has impacted students' brains and how they learn. Participant 2 spoke about this in-depth, stating:

> "I think that mental health has really been impacted for a lot of people. And then, it feels like our resources have lessened. Like I feel like 10 years ago, I still had many students with mental health issues, and… if I went through a checklist there would be, well, would this be better? Or would this be better? And there were a lot of resources. I feel like they've been slowly stripped away."

Participant 2 felt like the previous solutions and adaptations for mental health issues were no longer working. On top of that, the resources they used to have access to have been dwindling. The laws around Special Education have changed as well as the qualifying factors. The tools and measurements that are being used may be inaccurate. The combination of these factors led to increased worry among Special Educators. They became more worried about their

students' mental health and their well-being, especially when they weren't always able to make contact with them.

Student and Parent Participation

Participation was at an all-time low during the pandemic. Students did not always have their cameras on or attend classes. Young adolescents are known for being self-conscious about how they look and act (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Many factors made it difficult to get students to participate in online learning, particularly live sessions. One of these factors included being self-conscious about turning on their cameras due to their looks and their homes. Some students are embarrassed about their homes and don't want their peers or teachers to see it. Another factor was an inability to turn on speakers to answer questions or hear what was said. Some students were too self-conscious or shy to turn on their microphones and answer questions. Others had siblings at home which could make it hard to hear and communicate. Assessments over the computer were also hard because it was easy for students to cheat and look up information. It made it difficult for Special Educators to accurately understand how their students were doing. With cameras off, microphones on silent, and the internet open to them, it was hard to tell who was there and who was learning.

Students were not the only ones not participating. Guardians sometimes struggled to participate as well. During online IEP meetings, the participants said it felt like the guardians weren't always paying attention. It could have been because there was something else happening in the home or because their cameras were off. Participant 2 described online learning as feeling "like I was talking to no one." Participant 1 described online learning as feeling "icky" because they would try different teaching strategies, only to get no response. It made Participant 1 feel like they couldn't figure out how to help their students.

Social-Emotional Development

Students' social-emotional development was perceived by the participants to be greatly impacted by the pandemic. The participants noticed that there was a piece missing in their students' social-emotional development after the pandemic. Students no longer understood how to be in a community or saw the benefits of being kind to their peers and teachers. It was also difficult for them to self-regulate, be in the school building, and sit still for an extended period of time. About this issue, Participant 1 stated:

> "Students really missed out on that social interaction, especially during younger years. By the time they get to us in middle school, they're really struggling with some of those self-awareness, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, self-organizational skills, which we see across the board not just for special education. But because there are so many students struggling in that area, it makes it harder to know if the student needs special education supports."

Students missed out on key years of social development. Current middle schoolers were in 2nd-4th grade when the school shut down and 4th-6th grade when schools returned to "normal." The researcher put the term normal in quotes because the pandemic has created a new normal. The years that current middle schoolers missed out on were pivotal to their social-emotional development as well as their academic development.

Loss of Prior Knowledge

The participants reported that all students were behind in reading, writing, and math. This gap has made it more difficult for Special Educators to determine which students need interventions. Online learning was difficult for everyone and current students do not have the same level of academic knowledge as pre-pandemic students. Special Education teachers and

general education teachers had to create new lesson plans in order to make up for lost knowledge.

Prior knowledge was taken for granted. Participant 2 explained how they had to reteach basic skills and knowledge that they had taken for granted before the pandemic. In their explanation, they described how a group of 6th graders did not know how to use scissors or which side of lined paper was the top.

With more students behind, it has become an expectation for Special Educators to take care of it. Every student is behind in some way and the participants expressed their limited capacity to solve these problems. The more students put in their caseload, the less impactful the Special Educators can be.

"Challenging"

One word that came up time and time again was the word "challenging." Online learning and teaching were challenging. Meeting students' needs during the pandemic was challenging. Having more expectations with less time and compensation was challenging. All of these challenges led to an increase in stress, frustration, worry, and burnout.

During the pandemic, Special Education teachers had to be creative and provide solutions to problems on the fly. Words to describe online learning were "discouraging" and "extremely challenging." When speaking about online learning, Participant 1 stated:

> "The data that we collected and talked about during the meetings was harder because teaching during the pandemic was more challenging. It made my job pretty much impossible to do. I had to redefine what success looked like in special education during the pandemic…we had to reinvent the wheel in terms of what differentiation looks like for students with accommodations, what hands-on learning looked like."

The challenges of teaching during the pandemic forced Special Education teachers to redefine what success looked like. They had less time for interventions and that came at the cost of student reading scores and attitudes. Time was a large constraint for the participants. As Participant 3 stated, “It was just a lot to balance when you’re case-managing and teaching your own class and co-teaching a couple times a day. It was definitely a lot to expect from one person.” In order to complete the paperwork, the participants would have to stay after school late. They were not compensated for the unconventional and time-consuming tasks they were assigned during the pandemic. Some of these tasks include setting up Zoom school and adapting lesson plans so they can be taught online.

The lack of time meant there was less focus on students. The participants felt like they were not meeting their students' needs. It became difficult for the participants not to compare where their students could be right now if it weren’t for the pandemic. Their teaching practices were forced onto the back burner in order to complete paperwork that is required by the state. Participant 1 described the time constraint as “not a great feeling” and felt like they were missing out on important time with their students.

What Administrators Can Do to Support Special Education Teachers and Students

Make an Effort to Understand

Administrators play an important role in schools. Administrative support can make or break Special Education experiences. The participants said that they wanted administrators to make an effort to better understand what special education is and how it fits into their school. It is also important that administrators know the special education laws–at the national level and the state level. Administrators need to have an asset-based mindset about special education and

students with disabilities. Participant 1 explained how admin and Special Educators should work as a team:

> "Special education students are all of our students and not a separate group, they just need a little bit more support and that's what I'm here for. I don't have the solutions for everything as a special educator, and we can really work together as a team."

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act's LRE (least restrictive environment) mandate requires schools to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms as often as possible (IRIS Center, 2019). Admin has to see students with disabilities as a part of the general student population, not as a separate population. Special Educators need the support of their admin in order to solve problems. In order to be a helpful teammate, the admin should be aware of what necessitates special education as well as which of their students have IEPs or 504s.

Be Aware and Present

Administrators should be aware of which of their students have IEPs, 504s, and/or behavior plans. It is important that if a student with a disability or accommodations ends up in the principal's office or is sent out of the classroom, the administrators present are aware of their disabilities and how it impacts their behaviors. Participant 3 said that administrators must be "gentle" and "informed" about how students might react in certain situations.

The best way to get to know students' behavior plans is to attend IEP meetings. Attending IEP meetings will strengthen administrators' relationships with the Special Educators, the student, and the student's family. Admin will also have answers to questions that Special Educators won't. Seeing how these meetings are going is also important because it tells the administrators if the IEP is helping the students inside and outside of the school environment.

Identify and Fill Gaps

Administrators should also be playing the role of defining whose job is whose. Participant 2 said that it would be beneficial for administrators to identify gaps in the Special Education department:

> "I think it would be good to look systemically at our school and figure out some gaps and supports that we have, and start working on a plan to start filling those gaps to work towards those supports because I think we have a lot."

Admin needs to look at their schools systematically in order to identify and fill gaps in the departments. If there is no movement towards identifying these gaps and filling them, nothing will get fixed and students will continue to slip through the cracks.

Co-Teaching and MTSS

Implementing co-teaching and a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) in their schools is another way admin can support Special Education teachers and students with disabilities. Co-teaching is one of the most effective ways of supporting students with disabilities and it benefits general education students as well. There are four forms of co-teaching: (a) a push-in method where one teacher leads the lesson while the other supports students; (b) two teachers leading different parts of the lesson; (c) parallel teaching where the class is split into two groups and two teachers teach the same content; and (d) one teacher teaches the bulk of the students while the other teaches a small group of students (Cassel, S. 2019). The second one is much more impactful but more time-consuming. It takes admin backing in order to successfully co-teach. Admin has to be present to help mediate and support the relationship between Special Education teachers and general education teachers.

MTSS is something that the state of Vermont has been trying to build up over the past decade. It's difficult to build a system like MTSS because it requires more resources that are available. It is important for administrators to continue building the MTSS structure in their schools and gather the resources necessary to set up a multi-tiered system of support.

What the State of Vermont can do to Support Special Education Teachers and Students

Funding

The state of Vermont can aid Special Education teachers and students with disabilities by raising funding. All of the participants expressed a need for more funding. Their school looks good on paper–they have a small ratio of teachers to students, for example. However, when you take a closer look at student needs or spend time in their classrooms, it is clear that they need more support. The staff are spread really thin and doing the best they can with what they have. Despite these needs, it is hard to convince those in charge of a bigger budget because it seems like they already have enough.

Proper funding opens doors, allows for more flexibility, and ensures the proper resources for student needs. Block-grant funding is currently being used. Block-grant funding provides a fixed amount of money based on the number of students and allows for broad flexibility in creating and implementing certain programs (Schardin, K., et al, 2004). The school the participants work at is a very small district with a lot of needs. They do not get enough funding to meet their students' needs. Speaking about this problem Participant 2 said:

> I think they've changed the weighting for students and how much money you get to support students and I think that they need to do a better job at looking at more complex learners…and we [school districts] are not all the same so I think that they need to work at the diversity of different districts and you know support them accordingly

The size of districts does not tell the full story. Every school district is different and has a different make-up of students. The participants' district is small and diverse. They need more funding than other schools that have a smaller number of BIPOC and special education students.

The participants also spoke about receiving overtime pay and a higher base salary. These factors would compensate teachers for the work they do after hours due to a lack of time. A higher base salary might make the job more popular and limit the teacher crisis happening all over the country.

Supervisory system

Another way the state of Vermont could aid Special Education teachers and students with disabilities would be to enact a supervisory system. Participant 1 mentioned that they would like a special education supervisor that could, "work to help coach and give us feedback and observe us and support things, [and] be able to look at students in creative ways." This would be beneficial because it would help Special Educators identify aspects of their job that they need to work on and it opens up a doorway to learn new teaching strategies.

Training

Offering more training and compensating teachers for attending meetings, such as paying for airfare or providing a paid absence to attend training, would aid Special Education teachers. The participants specifically requested professional development meetings and social skills groups. Training is beneficial because it allows Special Education teachers to continue growing within their practice. To be a teacher is to never stop learning. Time and funding limit the amount of training meetings the participants can attend.

Discussion

There were several limitations that the researcher's methods might place on the conclusions drawn from the researcher's data. The first limitation was a lack of participants. The researcher's Advisors Tricia Brown and Sean Hurley have advised the researcher to interview a smaller number of people, so the researcher did not overwhelm themselves. The smaller number of participants meant that the researcher was getting fewer opinions on how Special Educators and IEP Coordinators in Middle Schools in Vermont have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. There also may have been bias towards a particular viewpoint. As a Middle-Level Education major, the researcher has heard a great deal about the negative impacts the pandemic has had on students. Lastly, using interviews as a form of research collection could lead to some limitations. Interviews are not the most reliable form of data collection, the researcher can misinterpret participant answers, researchers can direct participants to answers that they want to hear, and participants might omit the truth (Ross, P. & Zaidi, N. 2019).

The focus of this study was to determine how Special Educators from a Northern Vermont school were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was expected that the pandemic would lead to increased feelings of stress, an inability to meet students' needs, struggles and solutions with technology, and the discovery of new forms of communication. The hypothesis was mostly supported by the data, the only area that was lacking was increased feelings of stress. Stress was never explicitly mentioned. Other negative feelings were mentioned about teaching during the pandemic. For example: "challenging," "icky," "worried," and "frustrating," were used to describe their experiences. These descriptors are closely related and often lead to increased feelings of stress, but stress itself was never formally stated.

Feeling unable to meet students' needs, struggles, and solutions with technology, and the discovery of new forms of communication were all supported by the data. The participants mentioned that they felt like they were not able to meet their students' needs during the pandemic and those feelings of failure have followed them into the post-pandemic world. This hypothesis was likely supported because online learning did not meet the needs of any student, and students with disabilities were impacted by this even more than general education students. "Is Special Education Funding Immune to COVID-19? Challenges Facing State and Local Special Education Leaders and Strategies to Mitigate the Pandemic's Impact," reported that only 8.5% of its 221 population reported that students' needs were being properly met during the pandemic (Menlove Doutre, S., & Willis, J., 2021). The participants felt like they weren't meeting their students' needs because it was hard to provide tools like multisensory learning to students with auditory processing disorders.

Struggles and solutions with technology were also supported by the data. Technology was a pivotal resource during the pandemic. During the shutdown, Special Educators had to get creative with technology in order to reach their students. Technology allowed them to build relationships with students and their families during an uncertain and difficult time. The participants used technological resources such as phone calls, texting, Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Chat to connect with students and their families. While technology was a useful tool that was used by Special Educators to keep in contact with students, it also came with some drawbacks. The participants' struggles with technology were not in line with the ones that were hypothesized. It was hypothesized that the participants would struggle with using and the inconsistency of technology. Instead, the participants struggled with connecting with students and their families over video and phone calls. It was less personal and it was harder for them to

show their support and care. Aspects like no eye contact, translators, and a lack of participation made it difficult for the participants to build trust. The lack of participation from students was also a drawback of technology. Students did not always have their cameras or microphones off. Factors like siblings, embarrassment about their living situations, and self-consciousness led to participation levels being at an all-time low. The availability of the internet at any moment also made it difficult for Special Educators to get an accurate picture of how students were doing. It is possible these drawbacks were more prominent to the participants because they were younger and more tech-savvy, therefore they had less trouble using technology.

The hypothesis of discovering more forms of communication was supported by the data as well. The participants communicated via phone calls, texting, email, video chats, video calls, Zoom, Google Chat, and Google Meet. Due to the lockdown, the participants could not meet with students and their families in person, so they had to find new ways to reach students and their families. They discovered that some guardians preferred texting and were quicker to respond that way instead of the previous strategies Special Educators would use to contact families. This hypothesis was likely supported by the data because Special Educators all over the nation had to find new ways to regularly contact families due to the lockdown.

These results are relevant to future educators, current educators, administrators, and members of the Vermont Agency of Education (VAE). It is relevant because the findings in this study will continue to be present in schools for many years to come. The pandemic continues to impact students and teachers. We do not want to leave anyone behind so it is important that we recognize the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on school systems. Special Educators are a very important resource that every school needs. Administrators, general education teachers, and VAE members should be aware of the struggles Special Educators faced during the

pandemic and the aftershocks they still deal with today. It is important for new general education teachers and Special Education teachers to be aware of the climate they are about to enter into. This research implies that the pandemic will continue to impact schools–particularly Special Education Departments–for years to come. There is likely more research being done on this topic as we have only just come out of the pandemic. Despite all of the darkness that descended upon us during the global pandemic, we have reached a point where light is beginning to shine once again. Yes, the impacts of the pandemic will be felt for long after it is over, but there is hope we will return to a new normal. I would like to conclude this paper with a quote from Participant 2 because I believe it captures the essence of this research project:

> "I feel like we were in survival mode for a while, and it's nice to be able to focus on some things and have some of those things be a little bit more typically developing in our adolescence. The kind of problems that we are used to. So I'm hopeful."

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