

## **“BUILDING THE PLANE WHILE TRYING TO FLY:” EXPLORING SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER NARRA- TIVES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

*In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in unprecedented changes in public education. This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry research design to explore special education teacher narratives related to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of data from daily internship experience journals and virtual focus group sessions yielded three overarching themes, which are described using participant quotes to provide a framework for narrating the shared experience of these teachers. The collective narrative gathered from these teachers' stories is critical to assisting teacher educators and school administrators in understanding practical considerations to inform preparation of special education teachers for future pandemics, similar crisis events, and/or for teaching special education from a distance (virtually).*

### **Introduction**

At the time of this writing, the year 2020 is but halfway through, and it has been a historic few months of uncertainty, fear, and change. The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in unprecedented changes in all aspects of American life (Robinson, 16 March 2020), none more dramatically than in public education. The authors of this study are faculty in a graduate program for special education in a large midwestern city. The state in which the university is located was the first in the nation to close public schools on March 17, 2020 (Dwyer, 2020).

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global emergency on January 30, 2020 and a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. In was not long after that schools across the U.S. began to shutter their doors for in-person instruction. The most recent pandemic from which education professionals had experience was the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic. During the H1N1 influenza pandemic, just over 700 schools in the United States closed as a non-pharmaceutical intervention (Klaiman, Kraemer, & Stoto, 2011). On April 26, 2009, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued guidance that schools with 2009 H1N1 cases close for at least seven days. On May 1st of that year the CDC changed this guidance for schools with cases to remain closed for 14 days. However, on May 5, 2009, the CDC guidance changed again, stating that school closure was not necessary (Klaiman, Kraemer, & Stoto, 2011). By contrast, when school closure was used as a non-pharmaceutical intervention

during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of schools across the country only closed for in-person instruction, and school professionals were expected to continue in their various roles to support student learning. In addition, the length of time schools were closed was longer than the H1N1 influenza pandemic as many schools in the U.S. closed their buildings in March for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

After the H1N1 pandemic, only a few studies were conducted that examined the experiences of school professionals, such that some researchers made it a point to stress the importance of conducting further research on the experiences of school professionals in order to create more effective pandemic preparedness strategies (Howard & Howard, 2012). To date, there appear to be no peer-reviewed studies available related to teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Problem Statement and Research Questions**

During this unparalleled time, the authors of this project wanted to explore how our graduate students, who were also full-time special education teachers, navigated the transition from teaching special education in-person to teaching from a distance. More specifically, we wanted to explore both the challenges and victories special education teachers experienced during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic so that we might identify lessons that could be learned to inform the field. As such, the research questions guiding this current study were:

- 1) How do special educators describe their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic?
- 2) What lessons can be learned from teachers' experiences for teacher educators and school administrators?

## **Method**

A qualitative narrative inquiry research design (Clandinin, 2013) was employed to explore special education teacher narratives related to their experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, narrative inquiry methodology allowed researchers to capture the voices of special education teachers through storytelling. It is grounded in the notion that story represents a way of knowing and thinking, which is particularly suited to clarifying the issues teachers deal with (Carter, 1993). Moreover, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) highlighted the power of hearing from teachers when they stated,

What is missing from the knowledge base of teaching... are the voices of the teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask, the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their work lives, and the interpretive frames teachers use to understand and

improve their own classroom practices (p. 2).

Giving teachers a voice by creating ways for their stories to be heard (i.e., daily journaling), is key to identifying lessons that can be learned from experience (Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003).

## **Setting and Participants**

Participants were recruited from three practicum courses that are required for completion of a special education graduate program at a Mid-western university. Most graduate students enrolled in the special education master's degree program teach full time during the day. More specifically, the majority of graduate students teach special education on emergency waivers, with only a few exceptions, where students are working as general educators. Upon completion of the special education graduate program, students will be eligible to take the appropriate Praxis exam and add the special education teaching endorsement to their initial teaching license. Courses within the program are primarily taught asynchronously to allow students flexibility with their busy work schedules. All three practicum courses were taught by the co-investigator. The courses are designed to be an observation, field-based course providing a supervised opportunity for students to evaluate and implement learning experiences, including application of educational interventions that are effective in meeting the language and literacy needs of students. In a typical semester, graduate students are observed teaching in their own classrooms by a member of the faculty. When the pandemic closed K-12 public schools throughout the state, it was determined that observing these graduate students in their classrooms would be an impossibility. The course syllabus was updated, and an alternative assignment was created for all students in which they were asked to write daily in an "Internship Experience Journal" in order to capture their thoughts, emotions, and general experiences during this historic time. This assignment also allowed researchers to explore how special education teachers experienced the world during the pandemic as they were living it (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

More specifically, each graduate student was asked to write their own self-narratives from their perspective as a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each graduate student completed a minimum of 37 daily journal entries from March 20 through May 12, 2020. Following IRB approval, graduate students were recruited via an announcement sent through Blackboard, which is the university's Learning Management System. All announcements are also automatically sent to the email addresses graduate students have linked to Blackboard which in most cases is their university student account. In the announcement (email), information about the study was shared, including that participation was strictly voluntary. The students were also informed that if they chose not to participate in the study, it would not impact their grade. If interested, students provided consent electronically via a Qualtrics link to the consent form. This procedure resulted in a to-

tal of 12 participants; 10 females and 2 males. All student participants were adults, current special educators over the age of 21-years and not part of a vulnerable population (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participant Gender, Experience, & Current Teaching Position*

Participant	Gender	Years of teaching special education	Year of teaching	Emergency waiver?
1	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); low-incidence self-contained special education	Yes
2	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); low-incidence self-contained special education	Yes
3	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public middle school (6-8); science and math special education for students with EBD	Yes
4	Female	<u>2</u>	Public elementary school (K-8); gifted education	Yes
5	Female	<u>1</u>	Public elementary school (K-8); high-incidence, inter-related special education	Yes
6	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); high-incidence, inter-related special education	Yes
7	Female	<u>0</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); kindergarten general education	No
8	Male	<u>≤1</u>	Alternative public high school (9-12) for students with EBD	Yes
9	Female	<u>0</u>	Public elementary school; preschool general education	No
10	Male	<u>1</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); high-incidence, inter-related special education	Yes
11	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public elementary school (K-5); low-incidence self-contained special education	Yes
12	Female	<u>≤1</u>	Public high school (9-12); special education social studies for students with high-incidence disabilities.	Yes

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected from both the daily internship experience journals and two 30-45-minute follow-up focus group sessions. The intent of focus group sessions was to collect data to complement and expand upon data obtained from journal entries. For the daily internship experience journal, students were asked to respond to this prompt:

You will maintain a daily reflective journal that you use to write freely on a daily basis about your experiences from your perspective as a teacher during this time of uncertainty and transition. Your experiences will likely all be different, and there is a lot that you (and future teachers) can learn from all that is going on right now. Please feel free to share your feelings, emotions, and responses to your daily experiences. I will be the only one who reads what you write, and it will be kept confidential. I would also like for you to be sure to reflect on what you learn each day about teaching and learning in general (both positive and negative).

Student journal entries were either uploaded to Blackboard as a word document or written directly into a textbox on Blackboard using Blackboard's journal feature. Participant journal entries were copied from Blackboard and stored into a secured study database. Participant names were removed, and entries were stored using assigned participant numbers.

Two separate focus group sessions were scheduled at the end of the semester, after course grades had been entered to ensure participants felt their answers would not impact course grades. The first group contained four participants in attendance, and the second group had a total of three. The first author conducted the focus groups. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed to guide focus group sessions (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Focus Group Interview Questions*

	<b>Question</b>
1.	What was your initial reaction when they closed schools?
2.	What has been the biggest challenge for you?
3.	What was the easiest transition?
4.	How did you navigate the demands at home and teaching online?
5.	How can you apply what you learned to your in-person classroom
6.	What do you see as the benefits of online instruction?
7.	Do you think schools should reopen in the Fall?

The questions were developed after both researchers conducted

the first round of read-throughs or preliminary analysis of data collected from the journal entries. Two separate focus groups were conducted through a cloud-based video conferencing platform (i.e., Zoom). The interview protocol was followed to guide the focus group discussion. The questions used also served as prompts to obtain more in-depth information from participants related to the study research question. The audio and video from each focus group were recorded and saved to a secure study database. Each focus group session was then transcribed by the principal investigator for analysis. Each group consisted of both study investigators and four students.

In addition, both the researchers kept an independent field log in which reactions, thoughts, and suggestions were recorded. These field notes were used in the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

A narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) approach was used during analysis, which allowed researchers to identify and then categorize “themes reflected in participants’ experiences, while simultaneously working to keep participants’ stories intact” (Edwards, 2015, p.269). The analysis of data began with an initial reading of the journal entries and the focus group transcripts (Stake, 2006). Then, both researchers independently coded the data using a content analysis approach to identify themes from the data relating to study research questions. Qualitative content analysis is defined as method for “the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Journal entries and interview transcripts were analyzed using line-by-line analysis, allowing for categories, subcategories, and themes to emerge. A color-coding process was used to recognize patterns within each journal entry and interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Preliminary categories were defined in correlation with the interview questions and were then organized and labeled together until immersion of that topic was achieved. Both researchers met weekly to discuss themes that emerged from their independent efforts and until they came to full agreement about themes (or participant quotes) that highlight the essence of the participants’ story over time. The researchers determined to use the participant’s words to identify the themes in order to capture the rich, thick meaning of their words. The analysis process was iterative and continued until no new information emerged from the data.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Every consideration was made by the researcher to represent the participant’s meanings and perspectives. Triangulation techniques (Cre-

swell, 1998, Stake, 2005), such as member checking, peer debriefing, and document analysis were utilized to assure rigor in this study.

## **Results**

Analysis of both daily internship experience journals and focus group interviews yielded three overarching themes, described using participant quotes, which provides a framework for narrating the collective experience of these teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes include: 1) “A Time of Such Confusion”, 2) “Building the Plane While Trying to Fly”, and 3) “I might have cried some actual tears.... And then I ate chocolate”.

### **“A time of such confusion”**

The statement, “*A time of such confusion,*” expressed by one participant, captures the essence of these teachers experiences just after hearing the news that schools would be closing for in-person instruction for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year. This news came abruptly and with little warning. In fact, teachers first heard the news on social media or from friends or family members, rather than directly from their school district. The in-person instruction that teachers were trained to deliver had ended, and they were expected to engage their students in “continuous learning opportunities” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2020), which was something they had never been asked to do before. Therefore, although school buildings were closed, school was still in session. Many were confused as to what this meant. Teachers were told to stay at home. As such, during the first few weeks, teachers initially shared feelings of confusion, uncertainty, and lack of control, which caused them to experience anxiety and frustration.

What an unbelievable time to be a teacher! The day we found out the schools were closing for the rest of the year; my family and I had taken a REALLY long walk...to [a local book store] to get a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Moby Dick*. It seemed the perfect activity for the dreary day and for a time of such confusion. While I was in the basement of [the local book store] where the children’s books are, my girls ran down to tell me the news that was circulating. Shock. Absolute shock. I tried to hold it together in front of my kids, who were, of course, initially excited, about not having to actually attend school daily. But my students, my kids, my “other kids” all started to fly through my mind. What did I last say to them? Did I hug them before they left the day before Spring Break? What projects were left to complete? Will some of my kids, who confide in me daily, be okay? What is my job now? HOW CAN I REACH MY BABIES??

Many of the participants expressed similar shock and confusion, coupled with their fear of the uncertainty of the pandemic. Teachers were confused as to what they were to do. They shared feelings of being overwhelmed in not knowing what their day was going to look like or what was expected of them, as they were getting unclear, sometimes conflicting, messages from school and district-level administration. The lack of control they had during this time appeared to contribute to an unsettling feeling of discomfort.

Many teachers were clearly grieving, as they shared stories of confusion, anxiety, and frustration, which led to feelings of loss. They felt a sense of loss of the traditional school year, their students, and a beginning loss of their sense of identity related to being teachers. One participant expressed this clearly,

Even now... two weeks later, I feel my heartbeat faster and the tears sting my eyes as I think about the absolute pain I felt that day. We walked the mile and a half back home, and I crumbled into my bed to cry on my own until I couldn't anymore. This job is so much more than a paycheck. It's a way of life. I would probably have better blood pressure and less stress if I did something else, but I would be void of so much that way. I don't teach students. I teach humans. Humans with souls and feelings and so much good to share. I will never take that connection for granted again.

A sense of loss was also clearly articulated by one teacher who confessed,

Another day has come and gone, and I feel my life is just flashing by day by day, and I am losing my grip on everything that matters and quickly my life is losing meaning. Today, I worried about everything, and I was angry because I miss my "kids"—my students were taken away from me. I did have therapy and that helped relieve some of my stress and anxiety. Still my life is in limbo and is quickly being turned upside down.

### **“Building the plane while trying to fly”**

After the initial confusion and loss felt by these teachers, they shared experiences related to navigating new work-related expectations that were sometimes challenging. One teacher captured the essence of these teachers' experiences during this time by stating, “I keep hearing, ‘we are building the plane while trying to fly it,’ and I just think we can do better than that...” Collectively, these teachers expressed feelings of being worn down, overwhelmed, and at times frustrated with new expectations while also trying to endure the fear and uncertainty that was generally associated with COVID-19 pandemic.

Teachers were immediately exposed to a variety of trainings, mostly technology-related, and were told that they were expected to “just focus on connecting” with students and families weekly. In fact, teachers shared that district-level administrators explicitly told them that “while we want learning to take place throughout all of this, academic are [sic] certainly not the most important thing.” Teachers shared that making connections was often difficult and for a variety of reasons, such as families not having internet, parents who were working, and general parent priorities being more focused on meeting basic needs than helping children complete continuous learning activities. Some teachers shared feeling bad putting more pressure on families who were already stressed and struggling.

Most teachers felt overwhelmed, mostly with the additional paperwork required, such as having to create Individualized Continuous Learning Plans (ICLP) for each student on their caseload. In addition, they were overwhelmed with having to learn ways to draft IEPs, share confidential documents, collect signatures, and schedule virtual IEP meetings, all from home. Issues and frustrations with technology were a common theme among the participants. Some of the school districts utilized Zoom for a cloud-based platform, but quickly changed as strangers began hacking into or “Zoom bombing” sessions with derogatory photos and statements. The largest school district in the state transitioned away from Zoom and provided training on Microsoft Teams.

We have been blocked from using Zoom for school, but I guess using Zoom will give me another option for a different group to use if something like this happens again. The learning curve is big, because I have to learn and practice and teach myself how to use Zoom to do a virtual lesson because I don’t know anything about it.

Another participant expressed her frustration at the school district for lapses in communication related to the technology,

We have so many educated people in this district and SO many who are hired specifically for technology that we should be doing better when asking schools and teachers to use technology. Teachers aren’t at the “table” for these meetings, and we aren’t ever consulted in these matters so for me it’s really frustrating just to get told what to do but not how to do it.

These sentiments were echoed by another participant:

This was definitely the hardest day of teaching so far. I’m so over looking at my computer already. I feel like everything I’m doing relates just directly to logistics and technology and making sure we know how to use everything. I really want to use my creative skills to develop some cool things for my gifted kids that are beneficial to them. All I can figure out is how to get everyone on Zoom and MAYBE figure out IEP paperwork.

Overnight, they were pressed to learn how to teach online, how to support parents, how to modify courses for those homes without internet access, along with mountains of new paperwork. One participant wrote, “a lot of special education teachers are complaining about the sheer amount of work they have to do,” after the state required special educators to develop Individualized Continuous Learning Plan (ICLP) for each student on their caseload. This participant elaborated,

Essentially this includes the student’s description of disability, IEP goals, accommodations, and ways of meeting all of the students’ needs through the continuous learning. The part that took the most time was going back through the individual’s IEP to find all of this information and make sure it is up to date and in line with the continuous learning methods.

In addition to all the new responsibilities, participants realized that they needed to help their peers (other school professionals) and parents with technology glitches. “I knew that my fellow teacher struggles with technology, so I set up a google document and shared it with her so that we could work on filling out the class lists for next year.” Evident among the frustration was a rising spirit of creativity. One participant stated, “I haven’t decided if I like texting or email better. I think I will probably stick with texting my parents because I generally get better responses from them.” Another participant learned how to interact through a virtual cloud-based meeting,

I set up a Zoom meeting for next Tuesday and gave them homework to make a sea animal craft. I have been enjoying the Zoom meetings with the kids, and I look forward to seeing the crafts they make this week. I think I am going to look at printing a letter to mail to the kids and parents the week of school. I miss not being able to do the end of the year with them and want to send them something nice to recognize them leaving Pre-K.

Teachers were also overwhelmed because of the challenges associated with having to complete new work-related responsibilities from their own homes where their own kids or other family members were also present daily. Work-life balance was a struggle for these teachers. As one teacher stated, “Home is where I do what I want to do. Home is where I can just ‘be.’ Home is where I don’t have to be ‘on.’ But this all changed a few short weeks ago.” Another participant explicitly stated that that working from home was a “new challenge” for her family and shared that her children were used to, “a mom that engages them in different activities throughout the day when we are home not to a mom that has to spend the morning making phone calls.” Some participants also described it being difficult to find a place to “set up a little office” where they could work. Challenges associated with working were causing a great deal of stress as participants were truly “building the plane while trying to fly.” The stress

associated with this is evidenced in the following participant's statement,

I had a meeting with the ESOL teachers and interrelated teachers from my building on Teams. That was a bit of a challenge because my husband was not home, and both of my teenage boys were acting up and cussing and being out of control in the background. I do not think that they understand that this is my job and what they do while I am online reflects on me. I am so counting down the weeks until summer because the stress and anxiety of things being different is a little bit too much for me.

One critical aspect of the results of the data was made clear: the participants were experiencing grief in their isolation from their students, schools, and peers (Tempski et al., 2020). Our future research will focus on this aspect of the study in further detail.

**“I Might Have cried some actual tears.... And then I ate chocolate.”**

As participants settled into their daily work, completing what was newly expected of them and navigating the associated challenges, they then began to share loss associated with coming to the realization that their role as teacher was shifting. One participant's statement shares the essence of this part of these teachers' story, as she states, “I might have cried some actual tears...And then I ate chocolate.” Participants shared ways that they came to cope with their persistent sense of loss.

Broadly, teachers primarily felt like they had lost the part of their identity associated with being a teacher. More specifically, they indicated that what they were doing was not what they thought it meant to be a teacher and not what they had gone to school to do. Participants shared losing the part of being a teacher that related to human connection and creating meaningful relationships which they described as being a foundational part of teaching and the teaching-learning process. Associated with this loss, they described feeling frustrated with the teaching profession as well as feeling angry because what they were experiencing was not what they had learned in college. They were losing part of their old role and realizing that their role was shifting. In fact, one teacher explicitly stated, “I haven't done any teaching since March 12th....” Although school districts scrambled and cobbled together a quick plan for the remainder of the school year suddenly teaching wasn't what they were doing.

These teachers were tired of looking at computer screens and being on the phone and felt that everything they were doing related to “logistics and technology.” They missed being able to use their creative skills to develop learning activities that would contribute to student learning such that some teachers described feeling a sense of guilt. Teachers coped by finally going beyond what was expected to be able to use their creativity. For example, one teacher stated,

I've really been missing the teaching and creative aspects of my job. I want to be able to create really cool things for my kids who just have completely boring packets of worksheets to complete from the district right now. There has been a huge amount of guilt over all of this, but I knew I had a lot of other things to get settled first before I could get to that. On Monday and Tuesday I sent out my first sets of CHOICE BOARDS that I created for each of my students with an IEP and to students who I've been seeing for enrichment.

In addition to coping by going above and beyond to find ways to use their creative skills, participants also appeared to cope by focusing on positive aspects of their shifting role such as having more time for self-care and some of the freedom associated with working from home. For example, one participant stated,

Taking the walk from my bedroom to my 'kitchen office,' wearing sweatpants, and a black t-shirt, getting ready to attend a 'staff meeting,' felt amazing. Finally, joggers were acceptable work attire, and my commute to work was literally a distance of fifty feet. A smile crept across my jaws as I logged on, checked my nostrils for any bats in the cave, and swiftly greeted my co-workers with the push of a button.

So as much participant reaction was comprised of confusion and loss, teachers coped in ways that contributed to them finding the positive aspects in what they were experiencing.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The collective narrative gathered from these teachers' stories during the COVID-19 pandemic yielded important lessons that both teacher educators and school administrators should consider to understand the potential changes and planning that may be necessary as a result of the impact that the pandemic has had on the field of education. More specifically, the lessons learned can assist teacher educators and school administrators in understanding practical considerations to inform preparation of special education teachers for future pandemics, similar crisis events, and/or for teaching special education from a distance (virtually).

One of the key findings from this study is that these teachers experienced a tremendous sense of loss. In the beginning, the loss they felt was related to the confusion associated with schools abruptly closing and not being able to see their students. However, their feelings of loss persisted, and later were more closely related to work-related frustrations and their realization of their shifting role. What they thought it meant to be a teacher was rapidly changing; they were losing part of their teacher identity, the part that demanded meaningful human connections and student relation-

ships, as well as being able to see the impact of their work, i.e. student learning. An important lesson that can be learned from this is that positive student-teacher relationships are indeed a foundational part of the teaching-learning process that are reciprocally impactful for both students and teachers. The impact of positive student-teacher relationships on student learning is well-documented (e.g., Hughes, 2011; Pasta et al., 2013; Prino et al., 2016). However, less is known about the impact that student-teacher relationships have on teachers and the important work that teachers do.

More specifically, teachers were grieving. Grief, is well known to be the emotional distress that follows loss (Howarth, 2011). Grief and the grief cycle (Kubler-Ross, 1969) have been most often associated with the death of a loved one. The five stages of the Kubler-Ross (1969) grief cycle model include:

- 1) denial (avoidance, confusion, shock, fear),
- 2) anger (frustration, irritation, anxiety),
- 3) depression (overwhelmed, helplessness, hostility, flight),
- 4) bargaining (struggling to find meaning, reaching out to others, telling one's story), and
- 5) acceptance (exploring options, new plan in place, moving on).

There does appear to be some parallel between the grief cycle and what teachers in this study were feeling. For example, teachers first experienced confusion and shock. Then, they were frustrated, overwhelmed, and were working to move on with a new plan. The non-death loss experienced by the teachers in this study is only beginning to be understood (Gitterman & Knight, 2018). Future studies should consider exploring the experiences of teachers during the pandemic using the grief cycle as a framework for analysis.

Almost 20 years ago, Gardner (2000) stated, “with the possible exception of the church, few institutions have changed as little in fundamental ways as those charged with the formal education of the next generation” (p. 30). Another important finding from this study was that the current crisis clearly demonstrated that educators and the K-12 school system were not prepared for the logistical and technological challenges of the pandemic. Newton (2020) affirmed this in a recent survey of teachers where over 80% said they were not prepared for online instruction. Our university, along with many others, have developed online learning or hybrid (part online, part in person) courses for many years. However, teacher preparation programs may need to consider enhancing their programs to better prepare teachers on how to use various learning management platforms, as well as specific instructional methods and strategies that can be used to teach special education online.

Moreover, although students today are more technologically advanced than any other generation, they are often not prepared for full-

time online learning. As Korkmaz & Toraman (2020) discovered there is a unique change in educational philosophy connected with online instruction that has been neglected in teacher preparation. This needs to be incorporated into the curriculum for teacher education so they understand the unique aspects of online instruction that requires additional collaboration, community, student-centered needs, and connectivity. The lesson learned is that all school professionals need to be prepared to navigate instructional technology, as well as ways to seamlessly pivot to distance learning (online), when needed. In fact, we may find that the impact of the pandemic will be that more school districts may decide to allow families to make choices more often about which learning format (i.e., on site/in person, virtual learning synchronous/asynchronous) works best for students. As such, prioritizing technology use and teaching strategies for virtual learning is more critical now than ever before.

Lastly, this study further confirmed the importance of considering the implications of teacher working conditions on work performance (or their ability to teach). For example, recent research has documented that teacher working conditions mediate teacher attrition (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2016). During the pandemic, teachers were forced to work from home, and it came with many challenges. School administrators may want to explore giving teachers other options for places to work to help balance home and work life, such as working from their classrooms even though students are at home. This may also contribute to decreased feelings of stress and improving the overall well-being of teachers, especially during times of crisis.

### **Recommendations for Teacher Educators and/or School Administrators**

Our discussion of the key findings from this study yielded several recommendations that both teacher educators and/or school administrators may want to consider when making changes and planning to prepare teachers for future pandemics and/or crisis events.

- Be proactive and prepare teachers for the loss they might feel in the event that schools abruptly close. Provide teachers with coping strategies they might use to manage their feelings of loss.
- Consider ways to support teachers and other school professionals that are consistent with the grief cycle (i.e., information and communication (stages 1 & 2), emotional support (stage 3), and guidance and direction (stages 4 & 5).
- Position teachers “at the table” for decision-making around policies and practices that related to their working conditions as well as the kids and families they serve.
- Advocate for the use of distance learning (virtual) instructional practices that facilitate the development and/or maintenance of

positive student-teacher relationships (e.g., synchronous meetings, daily check-ins, mentoring sessions).

- Assure there are laptop computers and portable WiFi hotspots available for families who do not have access to these at home.
- Specific to special education, it may be necessary for students in special education to come to the campus for their learning and support services. The school needs to have the equipment and procedures in place for this eventuality. For example, ways to safely have the students in the same room with dividers, clear plastic masks so faces are not covered, staggered release times from classroom, or eating in classrooms to avoid crowded common areas. In addition, assure that there are adequate supplies of cleaning/disinfecting materials and good ventilation.
- Enhance teacher preparation curriculum as well as professional development trainings to better prepare teachers to use a variety of instructional technology as well as research-based strategies for teaching online.
- Create a space for teachers to work when teaching online and give teachers choices on where to work during a pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

A great deal can and will be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. This study contributes some lessons learned from one sample of teachers. Teachers are resilient and experts at problem solving. However, we can't expect teachers to always weather the storm that they are thrown into. These findings can be used when weighing the potential impact that future pivots to distances learning might have on teachers. Future research is needed to explore how the experiences of special education teachers were different from other school professionals. Teacher educators and school administrators must take the time now to draw upon lessons learned from this study, as well as others, to proactively prepare plans to guide teachers and give them the tools to navigate future pandemics or similar crisis situations.

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