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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

By

Travis A. Depuydt

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

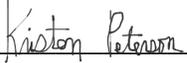
This thesis by Travis Depuydt is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service and by the Dean of Graduate Education and Research.

 01/13/2021

Committee Chair: Bethney Bergh, PhD Date

 01/13/2021

First Reader: Abby Cameron-Standerford, EdD Date

 01/14/2021

Second Reader (if required): Kristin Peterson, PhD Date

 01/13/2021

Department Head: Joseph Lubig, EdD Date

 04/23/2021

Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert Date
Dean of Graduate Education and Research

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

By

Travis A. Depuydt

This qualitative, phenomenological research study was designed to study the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher interactions with students with special needs during the mandatory school closures that took place during March of 2020. This study consisted of seven interviews with special education teachers, from three different districts, located in Menominee and Delta counties in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Participant responses to interview questions (See Appendix C), revealed six common themes:

1. Inability to consistently connect with students and a lack of participation amongst students.
2. Lack of training and no prior online teaching experience.
3. Lack of available technology and connectivity available for all students.
4. Lack of ordinary routine and direct instruction.
5. Academic and emotional regressions in students.
6. Having resources that align with the online platforms that districts are using

With the findings of this study, school leaders may be able to develop policies that will better serve students with special needs in the event of future long-term school closures.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), Seventh Edition.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2020, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan announced that in order to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Michigan, she would be ordering the closure of all K-12 school buildings, public, private, and boarding, to students starting Monday, March 16 until Sunday, April 5. On April 2nd, 2020 Governor Whitmer issued Executive Order 2020-35 which ordered all K-12 school buildings to close for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Whitmer, 2020). Upon news of the closure, school districts across Michigan were required to develop Continuity of Learning and Covid-19 Response Plans to ensure that students continued to receive a quality education. In addition, districts were required to develop contingency plans to meet the needs of those students that qualify for special education services. Although all students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study looks at the impact COVID-19 had on teacher interactions with students with special needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to learn special education teachers' experiences with the transition to distance learning, and the impact it had on their interactions with students with special needs, due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the spring of 2020. As the Special Education Director in my own district, I have witnessed first-hand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students with special needs. With the findings of this study, I hope to create guidelines that will help local leaders develop policies that will better serve students with special needs in the event of future long-term school closures.

Research Question

How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact teacher interactions with students with special needs?

Theoretical Framework

Armitage et al. (2019) defines change theory as a process for individual and organizational learning that includes analysis of actions, outcomes, and consideration of the explicit and implicit assumptions about how actions and outcomes are interconnected. Key principles of change theory include an emphasis on learning through the complexity of problem situations, a commitment to have a process led by those most affected by a particular problem, and a recognition that the framework is a “compass” for navigating change as opposed to a defined map or blueprint (Valters, 2015).

This study will look at how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted teacher interactions with students with special needs and their experiences streamlining curriculum, providing services virtually, and interactions with parents. Using change theory as the theoretical framework, this study aims to provide guidance for leaders and teachers if impacted by long-term school closures in the future. “Change theory or change knowledge can be very powerful in informing education reform strategies, and in turn getting results, but only in the hands (and minds, and hearts) of people who have a deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get particular results” (Fullan, 2007, p. 27).

Definition of Important Terms

Special Education Teacher: educators that work with students who have a wide range of learning, mental, emotional, and physical disabilities.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD): The umbrella term “SLD” covers a specific group of learning challenges. These conditions affect a child’s ability to read, write, listen, speak, reason, or do math (Lee, 2019).

Other Health Impairment (OHI): The umbrella term “other health impairment” covers conditions that limit a child’s strength, energy, or alertness (Lee, 2019).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): ASD is a developmental disability. It covers a wide range of symptoms, but it mainly affects a child’s social and communication skills (Lee, 2019).

Emotional Impairment (EI): Various mental health issues can fall under the “emotional impairment” category. They may include anxiety disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and depression (Lee, 2019).

Speech or Language Impairment: This category covers difficulties with speech or language (Lee, 2019).

Deafness: Kids with a diagnosis of deafness fall under this category (Lee, 2019).

Hearing Impairment: The term “hearing impairment” refers to a hearing loss not covered by the definition of deafness (Lee, 2019).

Deaf-blindness: Kids with a diagnosis of deaf-blindness have both severe hearing and vision loss (Lee, 2019).

Orthopedic Impairment: An orthopedic impairment is when kids lack function or ability in their bodies (Lee, 2019).

Intellectual Disability: Kids with this type of disability have below-average intellectual ability (Lee, 2019).

Traumatic Brain Injury: This is a brain injury caused by an accident or some kind of physical force (Lee, 2019).

Multiple Disabilities: A child with multiple disabilities has more than one condition covered by IDEA. Having multiple issues creates educational needs that can't be met in a program designed for any one disability (Lee, 2019).

Distance Learning: Distance education is the practical subset of education that deals with instruction in which distance and time are the criterial attributes; that is, student and teacher (and other students) are separated by distance and/or time (Yacci, 2000).

Pandemic: The worldwide spread of a new disease (WHO, 2010).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

During a severe pandemic, mitigation strategies are likely to cause stress and confusion among children, as well as parents and other family members. The long-term closure of schools and other social distancing strategies will disrupt children's routines. According to UNESCO (2020), there are a number of consequences that can result from long-term school closures; most of which affect mental stability:

- **Disruption of learning:** Since the closure of schools implies a deprivation of the right to education and to their own personal development. The more access to education is limited, the greater the damage caused by the closure of educational centers.
- **Food:** As there are a large number of children and young people who only have the food they receive in schools for free or at a minimal cost.
- **Poor training of parents for distance learning:** This circumstance is due to the low educational level of the parents, so that once again, the most disadvantaged families are harmed to a greater extent.
- **Unequal access to information and communication technologies:** The lack of resources, once again, increases the digital divide, which leads to a difficult obstacle to overcome to access learning from digital platforms.
- **Lack of childcare:** As a result of parents having to leave the house to seek the livelihood of the family, the children are left alone in the houses, and with it, a series of very negative consequences arise.

- Economic consequences and increased unemployment: Parents with young children have to stay at home to care for their children, which causes a loss of wages and damages the productivity of the region.
- The previous situation is further aggravated when it comes to health personnel who must leave their job, which is very necessary in a pandemic situation.
- After prolonged closure of schools, the possibility of the dropping out of students who do not return after the closure order is completed increases.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a pandemic on March 12, 2020. On March 18, 2020, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimated that 107 countries had implemented national school closures related to COVID-19, affecting 862 million children (Viner et al., 2020).

The abrupt, long-term, closure of schools across the country had districts scrambling to streamline resources in an effort to meet both the academic, and intellectual needs of all students. In the United States, there are over seven million children with disabilities (mental, emotional-behavioral, physical, and more) that require special services in school under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (Silva, 2020). A critical component of IDEA is to provide students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), and the U.S. Department of Education has clearly indicated that school districts are still required to provide FAPE during this pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), including the implementation of IEPs to the maximum extent possible. During the COVID-19 pandemic, districts across the country are continuing to provide services online to students with special needs. In remote areas without access to the internet, many service providers have been forced to provide services via teleconference.

The purpose of this review of literature is to examine existing research on the emotional impact that long-term school closures, caused by pandemics, have on students and teachers. Articles were selected for this review through the use of the computerized databases of Northern Michigan University's OneSearch, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Reference sections of literature was also used to find relevant articles.

History of Long-term School Closures

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts across the country have faced long-term school closures as the result of various sicknesses and natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina was the one of most devastating natural disasters in the United States that hit Southeast Louisiana in August 2005. One, often overlooked, consequence of Hurricane Katrina was the dislocation of nearly 180,000 students. Some students moved to other states in the U.S (e.g., 45,000 dislocated students went to Texas, 8000 to Georgia, 5500 to Florida, 5000 to Mississippi, etc.). Ninety-three percent of the evacuee students were from the most affected cities in Louisiana, but only 69% of them stayed in those cities the following spring as the result of relocation (Tian & Guan, 2015). A study by Tian and Guan (2015), examined the effect of Hurricane Katrina on displaced students' in-school behavior using a unique dataset. The results showed that relative to non-evacuees, displaced students' likelihood of discipline infraction increased by 7.3% after the hurricane. Thus, when disasters occur as was the case with Hurricane Katrina, in addition to assistance for adult evacuees, government in cooperation with schools should provide aid and assistance to displaced children to guarantee their mental health and in-school behavior.

In an influenza pandemic, students are effective in spreading the virus, and school closure is often considered the first non-pharmaceutical intervention for implementation. During the

1918 influenza epidemic in the United States timely school closures were significantly associated with reduced mortality. A study conducted by Chen et al. (2011) looked at the impact of H1N1 pandemic on students and families at a public school in Taiwan. Results of the study showed that 60% of children were cared for by the parents themselves, 35% by other relatives, and 4% by others. No children went to childcare centers, as was advised by the health authorities. However, 1% children had to stay home alone, because their parents were unable to find babysitters. Despite the negative economic influence that the H1N1 pandemic had on families, the majority of families supported the school's short-term school closure.

Emotional Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students

Currently, there are few studies that have been completed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students with special needs. However, a number of studies related to pandemics have shown a negative impact on the mental health of students during long-term school closures (Pragholapati, 2020). Although the majority of students have been able to receive support for mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic, the emotional impact that virtual supports will have on student mental health is unclear at this time. A study on student anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cao et al., 2020), indicated that 24.9% of college students were afflicted with experienced anxiety because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Of these students, 0.9% experienced severe anxiety, and 21.3% experienced mild anxiety. The study identified several COVID-19-related stressors which included: economic stressors, effects on daily-life, and academic delays, all which were positively associated with anxiety symptoms.

Similarly, a study conducted by Chen et al. (2020), asked 992 college students to take a survey that measured seven dimensions of their psychological well-being: mental status,

knowledge of stress management, behavioral patterns, risk perception, academic stress, family relationships, and peer relationships. Results of the cluster analysis indicated that student mental status can be divided into three groups: high-risk ($n = 61$, $M_{age} = 19.26$, $SD = 1.32$), medium-risk ($n = 627$, $M_{age} = 19.43$, $SD = 1.38$), and low-risk ($n = 304$, $M_{age} = 19.54$, $SD = 1.49$). Results of a multiple regression showed that social isolation has had an influence on the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder [$F(12, 979) = 44.894$, $p < 0.001$], fear [$F(12, 979) = 30.776$, $p < 0.001$], hypochondria [$F(12, 979) = 22.530$, $p < 0.001$], depression [$F(12, 979) = 39.022$, $p < 0.001$], and neurasthenia [$F(12, 979) = 45.735$, $p < 0.001$] via various factors (Chen et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Hou et al. (2020) looked at fifteen classes from five senior high schools in rural areas of Anhui Province. Subjects self-reported the frequency with which they participated in physical activities that increased heart rate. The 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), and the Impact of Events Scale - Revised (IES-R) were used to measure depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, respectively. A total of 859 high school students were recruited in the study. Most participants were males (61.4 %) and aged 16 years and below (79.4 %). A total of 87.1 % had siblings, 54.9 % reported poor academic records, and 67.4 % reported low exercise frequencies.

The results of the study indicated that 71.5 % of students demonstrated symptoms of depression, 54.5% demonstrated symptom of anxiety, and 85.5% demonstrated symptoms of PTSD. In addition, 31.3% of students reported having suicidal thoughts. Based on the findings of the study, Hao et al. (2020) concluded that senior high school students in rural China reported a high prevalence of depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms, and a considerable proportion of

students presented suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts during the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that psychological interventions for depression, anxiety and suicidality should be prioritized to help vulnerable senior high school students.

A cross-sectional study conducted by Odriozola-Gonzalez et al. (2020), aimed to analyze the psychological impact of COVID-19 in a university community during the first weeks of confinement. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) was employed to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. The emotional impact of the situation was analyzed using the Impact of Event Scale. An online survey was completed by 2530 members of the University of Valladolid, in Spain. Moderate to extremely severe scores of anxiety, depression, and stress were reported by 21.34%, 34.19% and 28.14% of the respondents, respectively. A total of 50.43% of respondents presented moderate to severe impact of the outbreak. The findings also showed that university staff presented lower scores in all measures compared to students, who seem to have suffered an important psychological impact during the first weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Emotional Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Teachers

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning was an unprecedented experience for most teachers and students; consequently, they had limited, to no, experience with online learning platforms. In March, educators were expected to streamline their teaching strategies with little to no training using online platforms. This added pressure, in addition to the other areas of life impacted by COVID-19, had serious repercussions on teacher mental health. A cross-sectional study conducted by Amri et al. (2020), looked to assess the magnitude of teacher burnout, and other factors associated to primary school teacher anxiety, during Morocco's confinement period. Burnout was evaluated using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the

factors of stress were assessed using a questionnaire. A Chi-square test was used to determine the association between the two qualitative variables and a logistic regression was used to perform a statistical analysis.

Results obtained from the MBI revealed that 68 teachers (54%) were victims of burnout, of which 47 (38%) had a low level; 15 (12%) had a moderate level and six (5%) had a severe burnout. Logistic regression analysis has shown that the risk factors for burnout during this confinement period are: the use and development of skills in new information and communication technologies ($p < 0.05$); work/family conflict ($p < 0.05$); social support ($p < 0.05$); and the workload related to distance education ($p \leq 0.05$) (Amri, et al., 2020).

Serving Students with Special Needs Virtually

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the confinement of people which, in turn, led to the closure of most businesses and the transfer of face-to-face education to distance learning. Faced with these new challenges, teachers were forced to adapt and employ new teaching strategies while still managing their own confinement. In addition to the challenges of streamlining resources in an accelerated fashion, special education teachers were faced with the issue of honoring students' Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) and offering therapies in a remote setting.

Both general education and special education teachers, regardless of previous experience with online instruction, were expected to provide high-quality instruction to all students during the mandatory school closures that resulted from the Covid-19 Pandemic. Typical practices in special education teacher preparation include strategies for direct instruction, behavior management, and social emotional development that lead to increased inclusion for students with disabilities (Brownell et al., 2005). However, there is not research about whether these strategies

are applicable online and if so, what they might look like. Furthermore, it is unclear whether these strategies could be used, since online teachers report having little to no control content or learning experiences (Crouse et al., 2018). Rice et al. (2016) suggests the following major skills that high quality online teachers should have when working with students with disabilities:

- Monitor student progress through the online course and intervene as early as possible when problems arise
- Provide instructional strategies and other specific support to students with disabilities that includes, but moves beyond, Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) when appropriate
- Assist students in learning important vocabulary and meeting other textual demands
- Extend opportunities for learner-learner engagement and general social skill development via the internet
- Advocate with vendors and support in-house course designers in making curriculum appropriate for students with various exceptionalities

It is a huge and disruptive, undertaking to move all existing courses to an online format in a matter of days. In general, a complete online course requires an elaborate lesson plan design, teaching materials such as audio and video contents, as well as technology support teams. However, due to the sudden emergence of the COVID-19, most teachers are facing the challenges of lacking online teaching experience, professional development opportunities, or knowledge of online learning platforms (Bao, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that educational institutions across the world, including teacher preparation programs, need to adequately train teachers on virtual instruction so they can continue to provide high quality education to all students in multiple formats.

Conclusion

The research on whether or not the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on student and staff mental health, resulted in the conclusion that anxiety and depression levels among students, and staff, were likely to increase as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the research identified that economic stressors, effects on daily-life, and academic delays, all were positively associated with the anxiety and depression symptoms present among students and staff. This conclusion was reached after reviewing numerous studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student and staff mental health.

This review of existing literature provides evidence from a variety of studies that suggests the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on student and staff mental health. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that educational institutions across the world, including teacher preparation programs, need to adequately train teachers on virtual instruction so they can continue to meet the emotional and academic needs of all students in multiple formats. The purpose of this research study is to add to existing research on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on special education teachers' interactions with students with special needs and their experiences transitioning to a distance learning model. With the findings of this study, educational leaders at local districts, and special education teachers, will be able to develop guidelines that will help better serve students with special needs in the event of future long-term school closures.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

In this chapter, the methodological framework for the research will be outlined, including the participants, procedures, and research design. The basis of the study will be centered around the research question, “How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact teacher interactions with students with special needs?”

The chosen methodology for this study will be a qualitative, phenomenological design. Sauro (2015) states:

In a phenomenological study, you use a combination of methods, such as conducting interviews, reading documents, watching videos, or visiting places and events, to understand the meaning participants place on whatever’s being examined. You rely on the participants’ own perspectives to provide insight into their motivations. (p. 1)

A phenomenological design was chosen for this study because, “all knowledge and experience are connected to phenomena, things in consciousness that appear in the surrounding world, inevitably and a unity must exist between ourselves as knowers and the things or objects that we come to know or depend on” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 44). This study will look at, specifically, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted teacher interactions with students with special needs and their experiences streamlining curriculum, providing services virtually, and interactions with parents.

Participants

For this research project, K-12 special education teachers from public schools located in Menominee and Delta counties were asked to participate in the study. Districts within Menominee and Delta county were selected based on the researcher’s familiarity with the district administrators within these counties. Additionally, districts within Menominee and Delta county

have varying enrollments which will offer unique participant perspectives and help to diversify data. A purposive sampling technique was chosen because it guarantees that all participants will have had experiences related to the phenomenon being researched; teacher interactions with students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The seven participants of the study averaged 9.7 years of experience, as a special education teacher, and had an average of 18.1 students on their caseloads. The students on their caseloads had the following eligibilities:

- Other Health Impairment
- Cognitive Impairment
- Learning Disability
- Emotional Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Deafness
- Physical Impairment

Procedures

Emails (See Appendix A) were first sent to district administrators asking permission to interview their special education staff. Eight district administrators were contacted in total for this study, with three agreeing to let their teachers take part in the study. Participant recruitment letters were then sent out to all special education teachers within the approved districts (See Appendix B). There were a total of fifteen special education teachers within the approved districts and seven agreed to take part in the study. Prior to conducting the interview, participants were sent interview questions (See Appendix C), and consent forms, and had the opportunity to

withdraw from the study at any time without fear of consequences or penalties. Virtual interviews were then scheduled using ZOOM, in an effort to adhere to state protocols concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing. Each ZOOM interview consisted of a series of questions that were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding design and phenomenological analysis. These procedures included horizontalizing the data and regarding every horizon, or statement, relevant to the topic, and question, as having equal value. These horizontalized statements were then clustered into common categories or themes, removing overlapping ideas (Moustakas, 2004). A thematic coding design was chosen because it allows for the data to be condensed and placed into more meaningful categories.

Data Collection

Once administration approval was given, and participants agreed to take part in the study, interviews were scheduled with all seven participants. Prior to the interview, participants were required to answer the following pre-interview questions:

- What is your current position and how long have you held that position?
- How many years have you been employed as a special education teacher?
 - What certifications do you currently hold?
- How many students do you serve in your current role?
- What is your educational background?
- What different eligibilities do the students on your caseload possess?

In addition to the completion of pre-interview questions, participants were required to sign a consent form prior to taking part in the interview.

In an effort to adhere to state and local guidelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were scheduled in a virtual format using the platform, ZOOM. Participants were

asked a series of twenty questions relating to their experiences with students and parents during the mandatory school closure that took place during March of 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Video footage of the interviews was recorded using ZOOM and two additional audio recorders were used in the event of a technological malfunction. Each interview lasted, on average, thirty minutes.

Data Analysis

Upon the completion of each interview, audio files were transcribed using Google's Voice Typing feature. The interviews were then reviewed again, and any errors from the Google Voice Typing feature were corrected manually. The interviews were broken down by individual interview question and a thematic coding design was used to identify any commonalities amongst participant responses and then compared to recent research regarding teacher interactions with students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, five to seven themes tend to emerge in qualitative research studies, with six emerging from this particular study (Creswell, 2012). Recommendations for district leaders and special education teachers, as well as suggestions for further research, are provided at the conclusion of this research project.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This qualitative, phenomenological study investigated the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher interactions with students with special needs during the mandatory closure of all Michigan schools that took place during March of 2020. Seven special education teachers, from three different districts in Menominee and Delta counties, were interviewed for this study. The interviews were transcribed using a thematic coding design with six major themes emerging from the data:

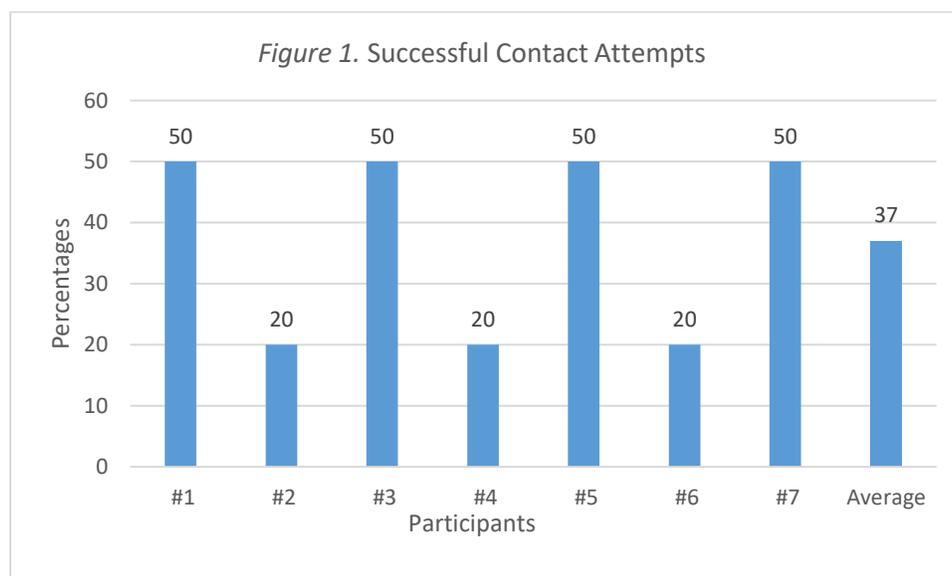
1. Inability to consistently connect with students and a lack of participation amongst students.
2. Lack of training and no prior online teaching experience.
3. Lack of available technology and connectivity available for all students.
4. Lack of ordinary routine and direct instruction.
5. Academic and emotional regressions in students.
6. Having resources that align with the online platforms that districts are using

Inability to Connect with Students and Lack of Participation Amongst Students

In all seven interviews, participants mentioned that one of the biggest issues they were having was an inability to consistently connect with students. Part of Michigan's COVID-19 Response Plan, required districts to create Contingency of Learning Plans (CLPs). These plans were adopted to ensure students still received a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) during the mandatory school closure and the main components of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were being honored. A key component of these plans was finding out specific times, and ways, in which teachers could reach out to students to offer support. One participant stated that, "I had the knowledge from the contingency plans telling the best times to contact

parents and students so that was frustrating on my end when they would not answer. I would get the runaround from parents” (Participant #1, personal communication, November 10, 2020).

Analysis of national testing data shows that students with higher absenteeism rates have lower scores on national standardized tests. Students must attend school regularly to benefit from what is taught, but each year, an estimated 5 million to 7.5 million U.S. students miss nearly a month of school. This lost instructional time increases dropout rates and achievement gaps (Ginsberg et al., 2014). It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased student absenteeism and contributed to an abundance of lost instructional time. Participants of this study, on average, were able to successfully connect with students 37% percent of the time when they attempted to contact them and reported that less than 50% of students would consistently turn in completed work. The following chart shows the reported responses from each participant:



During the interviews, participants also stated that they used a variety of different methods to try and connect with students including phone calls, text messages, emails, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Class Dojo, Remind, and Zoom. One participant even stated that they created a Google telephone number to try and connect with students:

At the end of the day I would call them using Google telephone so I didn't have to use my personal phone number to contact students and parents. So I did use the texting feature on that because I found that that was the easiest way for me to get ahold of kids" (Participant #5, personal communication, November 19, 2020).

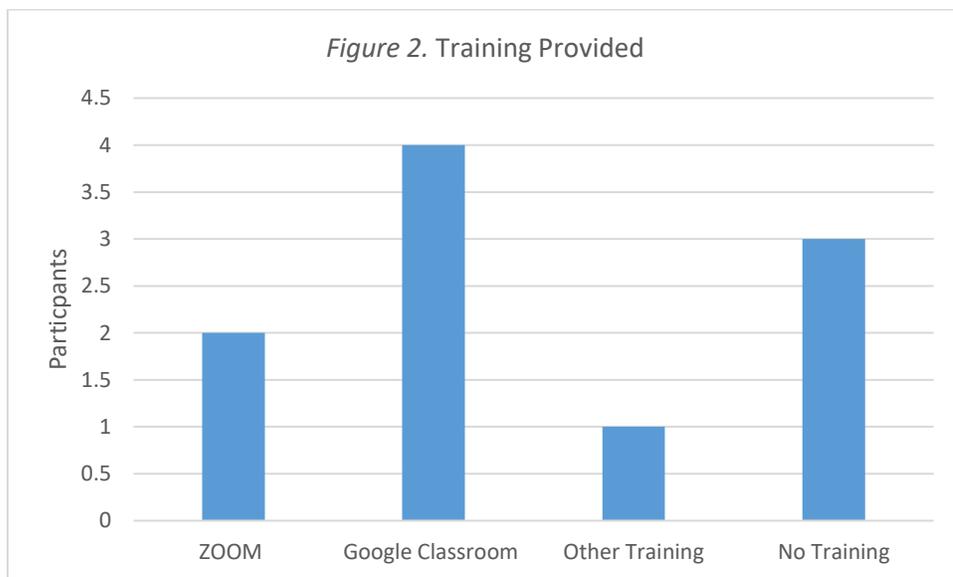
Three out of seven participants also stated that they had to reach out to administration multiple times to conduct wellness checks on students, and families, in which they were unable to make any contact with.

Lack of Training and Prior Online Teaching Experience

On March 12, 2020, Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan announced that in order to slow the spread of COVID-19 in Michigan, she would be ordering the closure of all K-12 school buildings, public, private, and boarding, to students starting Monday, March 16 until Sunday, April 5. With this announcement coming on a Thursday afternoon, school districts and teachers had one day to prepare for three weeks' worth of remote instruction before students were no longer allowed to be on campus. Then on April 2nd, Governor Whitmer made an additional announcement closing schools for the remainder of the school year. Following the governor's announcement, Participant #3 stated:

I think that not knowing the closure would last all year was difficult. I was actually at home with the flu when the governor made the announcement. I came in with the flu to pack stuff up for my students, trying to keep my distance so they could be ready. We didn't really have the ability to plan for the full three weeks, so as soon as it switched from short term to long-term that's when we made the switch in curriculum because we knew what we were doing initially wasn't going to work" (personal communication, November 17, 2020).

During each interview, participants were asked if they had any previous experience teaching in a virtual format prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and if not, what training was provided by their districts this spring. All seven of the participants stated that they had no prior experience teaching a virtual format prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but four participants stated that they have had experience taking courses in a virtual format. Additionally, three out of the seven participants stated that their district offered no additional professional development opportunities to help them with the transition to distance learning during the spring of 2020. All four participants that were provided professional development this spring, were trained using Google Classroom, with two also receiving training on ZOOM.



Those that received training this spring said it helped ease the transition to remote learning and those that did not receive training wished their districts would have provided it.

I wish we would have had professional development in our district. In our district we have to use ZOOM, that's what they decided, which is fine but I really wish we would have had a professional development that showed us all right away, 'if you want to use break out groups this is how you do this, if you want to chat with a student this is how

you do that.’ Really like a ZOOM for dummies. The same with Google Classroom. I mean I know that there's courses, and I've done them, but I just wish that, as a district, we would have all of our staff come together and say that, ‘this is Google Classroom, this is how you do this, this is how do you that.’ The professional development that we have been doing hasn’t been relevant to the world we are living in right now. (Participant #5, personal communication, November 19, 2020)

Lack of Available Technology and Connectivity for all Students

This project contains participants from both urban and rural districts in Menominee and Delta counties. Reliable internet connectivity is often hard to come by in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, especially for students in more rural areas. At a time when the state's K-12 students are displaced from school buildings during the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 300,000 lack internet access or a computer at home, according to a partial survey by Michigan school officials (Chambers, 2020). Lack of available technology, and connectivity issues, for all students was stated as an obstacle by five out of seven participants. For those that did not have reliable internet access instructional packets were sent home to families. “If they had internet access we would prefer them to be online, but if they didn’t have internet access we had to try to come up with something that was similar to what we were doing online. We would send packets home every other week so they could have something” (Participant #2, personal communication, November 17, 2020).

Many districts around the state have moved to one-to-one in terms of technology. This means that each student has access to his or her own device. However, for many small districts across the country, and in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, they are not in a financial position to move their district to one-to-one. In response to the question, “what could school leaders do to

better meet the needs of students with special needs during long-term school closure?” one participant stated:

Having tech available for students to get accustomed to as part of the normal school day would be helpful. I know it is tied to school funding, but we were not a 1-1 school.

Having technology like ZOOM and Google Classroom available would help all students not specifically just students with special needs. I think just making technology available and being able to integrate it into the school setting would be huge. (Participant #6, personal communication, November 24, 2020)

There are fears that low-income students will be unequally harmed by the shift to online learning, due to less access to online resources to compensate for lost in-person instruction (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020). It is safe to say that these same fears can also be applied to students with special needs.

Lack of Ordinary Routine and Direct Instruction

The National Association of Special Education Teachers states that structure and consistency are very important for students with special needs and that many do not deal well with change. Students need to understand clearly what is expected of them, as well as the consequences for not adhering to expectations (NASSET, 2020). The question, “What was the most difficult aspect of distance learning for your students?” was asked to all participants. Three out of seven participants stated that a lack of ordinary routine and students’ unfamiliarity with virtual learning platforms was the most difficult aspect of distance learning for their students.

One participant stated that:

The consistency and routine that you establish in a classroom isn’t the same online and so when you are explaining and modeling, you aren’t there physically to see where that

problem or glitch is and that is frustrating to students and parents. (Participant #4, personal communication, November 17, 2020)

Maintaining a routine induces a sense of discipline as well as safety in children, which is important for their psychological and emotional development. Making adjustments to routines, like, experiencing closure of schools and day care centers, social distancing and/or confinement to home can prove to be a real struggle for children with physical and mental disabilities (Bartlett et al., 2020).

Four out of seven participants stated that students not having access to direct instruction, 1-1 opportunities, teacher modeling, and immediate feedback was the most difficult aspect of distance learning for their students. In response to the question, Participant #3 stated:

It's so hard to properly model for them virtually. For a lot of them their connection is poor, so if they are trying to show me something on their paper its too fuzzy and I can't see it. Or if I am trying to show them something on the whiteboard they can't see it. I just think they miss out on 90% of what they benefit from in a special education classroom, as far as me being able to give them immediate feedback and model for them. I just feel like most of the strategies they benefit from face-to-face are hard to replicate online and they are distracted by what is happening at home. (personal communication, November 17, 2020)

Due to the lack of direct instruction available to students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have been tasked with trying to replicate services that students would normally be provided in a traditional school setting. Shifting classes online leads to a shortage of adequate special education assistance to children as parents cannot replace special education

teachers and there exists a lack of assistive technologies to aid them in their efforts. “It is hard to replicate virtually what we do with our students in a traditional classroom setting and that is frustrating for students and parents” (Participant #5, personal communication, November 19, 2020).

Academic and Emotional Regression

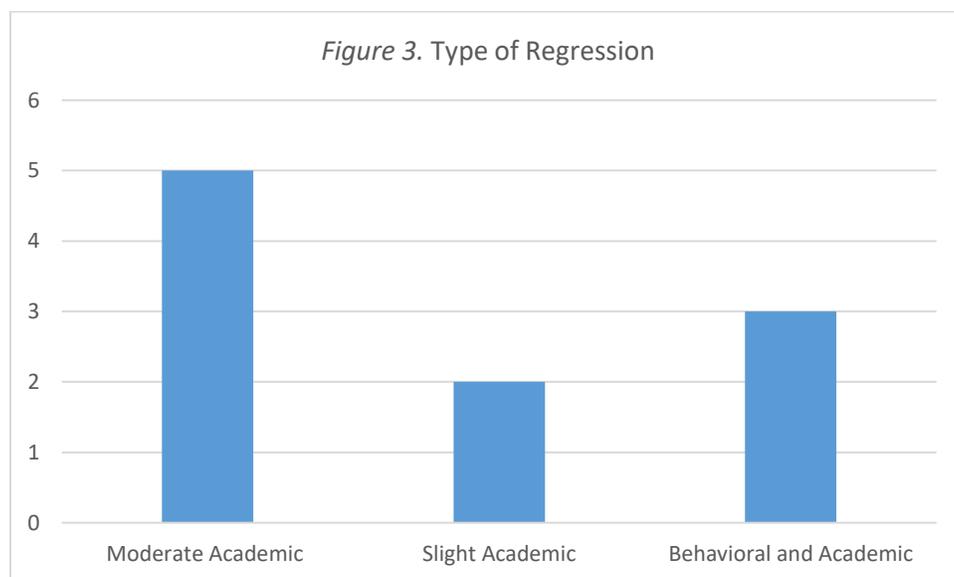
No one yet knows what the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be on students with special needs. Some teachers and researchers predict a major backslide in learning and that students will return to school having significantly regressed. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “summer slide”, already happens, in special-education students particularly, over winter and summer breaks. The longer students are out, the more likely they are to fall behind. Researchers are already starting to see a regression of skills among students in general, which portends even greater losses among those with disabilities (Hills, 2020). All seven of the participants said they noticed academic regressions in many their students, with two of them saying the regression was similar to what students experience during normal summers. Two participants also noted that some students did not regress and that was mainly due to parental support at home. “I would say there was a correlation between parent involvement and student regression. The more involved parents’ students even showed some slight gains in certain areas” (Participant #2, personal communication, November 17, 2020). A key component of Governor Whitmer’s executive order, that closed down schools for the remainder of the 2019/2020 school year, stated that student work collected during the shutdown could not count towards students passing or failing a course and they would receive the same grades they had prior to the shutdown. Three out of seven participants mentioned that student motivation was adversely

affected by that particular component of the executive order because there was no accountability attached to completing assigned work.

There was definitely less work completion. There was a disconnect to accountability because they knew nothing counted and there were no grades and they were getting the grades they had in March. They basically knew there was nothing you could hold over their heads. It impacted everyone from general education to special education.

(Participant #4, personal communication, November 17, 2020)

Three out seven participants also noted that they noticed behavioral regressions in their students, in addition to academic regressions. “Emotionally kids were scared and didn’t know if we would go back to face to face. They missed school, missed their friends, and wanted that sense of normalcy” (Participant #1, personal communication, November 10, 2020). One participant also noted that students were lashing out to get attention much more frequently than when in a traditional school setting due to lack of interaction with their peers. The following chart looks at all academic and behavioral regressions mentioned by participants:



Resources that Align with Online Learning Platforms

Many resources and curriculums that special education teachers use are unique. The documents and resources used in special education classrooms are not easily transferred to a virtual format. Many participants stated that not having resources that align with the online learning platforms used within their districts was frustrating. In response to the question, “What changes could school leaders make to better meet the needs of students with special needs during future long-term school closures?” one participant stated, “I think we would need some digital resources. A lot of my stuff is in paper format or is meant to be used in a classroom. I have to make my own stuff which can be really time consuming. More resources would help and give me more time” (Participant #2, personal communication, November 17, 2020). Similarly, one participant stated, “A lot of us were paying for things out of pocket last year to get materials so that we could do these interventions because nothing was digital and we didn’t get any reimbursements. So either having a budget for teachers to switch to virtual or having programs that can be easily implemented virtually” (Participant #7, personal communication, November 24, 2020). Students are more likely to stay engaged in a curriculum that supports their learning with effective teaching strategies and academic supports (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008).

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

This qualitative, phenomenological study examined special education teachers' experiences with the transition to distance learning, and the impact it had on their interactions with students with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. After conducting seven interviews, with practicing special education teachers from Menominee and Delta counties in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, six overarching themes emerged. These themes included:

1. Inability to consistently connect with students and a lack of participation amongst students.
2. Lack of training and no prior online teaching experience.
3. Lack of available technology and connectivity available for all students.
4. Lack of ordinary routine and direct instruction.
5. Academic and emotional regressions in students.
6. Having resources that align with the online platforms that districts are using

The goal of this research is to understand the difficulties that presented themselves to special education teachers and students with special needs, during the mandatory school closures and to create guidelines that will help local leaders develop policies that will better serve students with special needs in the event of future long-term school closures.

Conclusions

Although the adoption of distance learning is key to ensure the continuity of education following the physical closure of schools, students are, on average, likely to experience both academic and emotional regression during the lockdown. The switch from in person instruction to online learning caused by COVID-19 is likely to affect negatively those children, in primary and lower secondary schools, who have higher difficulties in adapting to the new learning environment. The switch is also expected to worsen existing educational inequalities. More vulnerable students, such as for instance those from less advantaged backgrounds and students with special needs, are especially likely to fall behind during this emergency period (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic will have a long-lasting impact on education and school leaders will need to take necessary measures to ensure that students and staff are prepared in the event of future long-term school closures or the adoption of a distance learning model. This study helped identify six themes that school leaders can use to guide future decision making as they make future district improvement plans. Firstly, it is critical that school leaders ensure that all students, especially those with special needs, do not fall through the cracks while participating in a distance learning model. Researchers have found that students with better attendance than their classmates exhibit superior performance on achievement tests and are less likely to engage in delinquent or destructive behaviors (Sheldon, 2007). Participants of this study reported that, on average, they were able to successfully connect with students, and students turned in completed work, only 37% of the time during the mandatory school closure that took in place in March of 2020. This lack of participation resulted in all seven participants observing noticeable

academic regression in their students and three participants also observing noticeable emotional regression. A study by Epstein (2002) looked at the following ways in which districts could increase student attendance:

- Rewarding students for improvements in attendance
- Calling home when students are absent
- Visiting homes of chronically absent students
- Giving families the name of a person to contact at school with questions in regards to attendance
- Conducting workshops on attendance for families
- Referring chronically absent students to truancy

Many of the principles identified in the study conducted by Epstein can be applied to improving attendance in a virtual setting. Participants of this study reported having difficulties reaching parents via email or phone, so alternative contact methods should be explored by districts in addition to phone and email. Within my own district we have had success utilizing PowerSchool, and our mass call out system, to send automated phone and text messages, to our students, and parents, informing of them of missing assignments and lack of attendance check-ins. In addition, our staff has also had some success using the communication platforms Class Dojo and Remind.

Additionally, districts could also explore the use of attendance incentives for those students that regularly attend classes and turn in completed work. Schools have employed a wide range of incentives to improve attendance, with varied levels of success (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). The results of this study have demonstrated that school districts need to leave no stone unturned

when searching for ways in which to ensure regular attendance and participation among virtual students.

Another theme, that will need to be addressed by school leaders moving forward, is a lack of available training and resources for staff and students. When asked the question, “What could school leaders do to better prepare staff members for future long term school closure?” all seven participants stated that they would benefit from more training on virtual learning platforms and more virtual resources. The seven participants in this study are employed at three different districts, all of which used either Google Classroom or ZOOM as their online learning platforms during the mandatory school closure that took place in March of 2020. Only four participants received training on these platforms prior to being asked to use them and those same participants stated that the training was not thorough. Moving forward school leaders need to find professional development opportunities for their staff that align with the online learning platform that the district has decided to use. Effective profession development should always be centered around relevant topics that are pertinent to the current needs of the district and right now that need is training on virtual learning platforms and online resources. In addition, school leaders need to explore online program of professional development in special education that would assist special education teachers in understanding the needs of their students, how they are accommodated in a regular classroom setting, and how those accommodations can translate to a virtual setting.

In addition to training on virtual learning platforms and access to additional online resources, teachers need training on effective online teaching strategies in order to be successful in a virtual setting. All seven participants in this study stated that they had no prior teaching

experience in a virtual platform, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The path of professional learning should begin with educator and administrator preparation programs, including internship and practicum experiences in virtual schools and with at-risk and students with disabilities as a requirement for professional educator and leader certification (Repetto et al., 2010). School leaders should look to partner with local colleges and universities to offer professional learning opportunities utilizing their highly qualified instructors with experience in successful online teaching. These professionals could provide valuable information on successful virtual teaching strategies for both general and special education teachers.

Limitations

The first limitation of the study was that there is a limited number of participants from a limited number of districts. A total of seven participants from three districts took part in this qualitative study. Although Creswell (2012) states that, “It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because with the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (p. 209) having multiple participants from the same district could create a lack of diversity in the data.

Additionally, a potential limitation to the study is the researcher’s familiarity and existing relationships with the participating district’s administrators. Participant knowledge of these relationships may have impacted participant responses or willingness to take part in the study.

A final potential limitation is the gap between the event being researched and the time in which interviews took place. The initial school closure being studied took place in March of 2020, while participant interviews did not take place until November of 2020. This lapse may

have resulted in less detailed accounts of actual events and participants using experiences from the current school year opposed to the previous school year.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on all facets of education, has been happening fast and frequently since the pandemic began. This qualitative research study identified six common themes from participant interviews, many of which would benefit from additional research.

Firstly, additional research on the academic and emotional impact that students with special needs encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic would be beneficial as educational leaders attempt to take proactive approaches to future long-term school closures. Parent, and student perceptions, of difficulties experienced during online learning would help identify focus areas for school leaders and curriculum designers as they attempt find the most impactful strategies for educational students with special needs in a virtual setting.

Although there exist many studies on ways in which districts can improve the attendance rates of students in a traditional school setting, very few studies exist on ways in which districts can improve the attendance rates of students in a virtual setting. With this study reporting attendance rates of around 50% for students with special needs during the mandatory school closure in March of 2020, work needs to be done to ensure districts have access to proven methods for increasing student attendance in a virtual setting.

Lastly, it is evident that very few elementary and high school teachers had previous experience teaching in a virtual format prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. I feel there is a need

for research that looks at teacher preparation programs and whether or not they offer courses in virtual instruction. A shift is needed in both teacher and administrator preparation programs to ensure that future teachers and school leaders have the knowledge needed to be successful in a virtual setting.

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APPENDIX A



Email to Administration

Dear _____,

My name is Travis Depuydt and I am currently a PK-12th grade principal at Carney-Nadeau Public School. In addition to this role, I am also a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. I am currently conducting a study that focuses on the impact COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher interactions with students with special needs.

I am reaching out to administrators across Menominee and Delta counties to request permission to interview their special education staff. The goal of this study is to identify ways in which districts can better serve students with special needs during future long-term school closures. Would it be permissible for me to contact your staff to see if they are interested in taking part in this study?

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Travis Depuydt
Northern Michigan University, Ed.S. Candidate
trdepuyd@nmu.edu

APPENDIX B



Email to Teacher: Teacher Recruitment

Dear _____,

My name is Travis Depuydt and I am currently a PK-12th grade principal at Carney-Nadeau Public School. In addition to this role, I am also a graduate student at Northern Michigan University. I am currently conducting a study that focuses on the impact COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher interactions with students with special needs.

I have already received permission from your superintendent/district administrator to email you. I would like to set up a brief interview to discuss your interactions with students, and parents, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why am I doing this study? I am interested in understanding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on teacher interactions with students with special needs. I want to share the findings from this study to help districts better serve students with special needs in the event of future long-term school closures.

What kind of data will be collected? Data will be collected through ZOOM meetings with special education teachers in an effort to adhere to CDC guidelines. Confidential data recorded during interviews will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet and handled only by authorized researchers. Any, and all, confidential documents will be properly destroyed upon completion of the study.

What are the benefits and cost of participation? The findings of this research may help special education teachers, and districts, better prepare for future long-term school closures. Additionally, findings from this study may inform future studies, improve leadership practices, or alter teacher preparatory programs.

What response is needed? Please respond via email regarding your permission to set up a meeting for an interview. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants will be sent interview questions ahead of time and will have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of consequences or penalties. If you have not responded after one week, I will follow up with you via telephone to answer any questions you may have.

Best, Regards,

Travis Depuydt
Northern Michigan University, Ed.S. Candidate
trdepuyd@nmu.edu

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Pre-Interview Questions (to be sent to participants via e-mail in advance):

- What is your current position and how long have held that position?
- How many years have you been employed as a special education teacher?
 - What certifications do you currently hold?
- How many students do you serve in your current role?
- What is your educational background?
- What different eligibilities do the students on your caseload possess?

Interview Questions:

- Please described your typical workday prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - How did that change when the mandatory school closures took place and schools transitioned to remote learning?
- Please describe your transition from face-to-face instruction to a distance learning format.
 - What was the most difficult aspect of the transition?
 - What was the easiest aspect of the transition?
 - Was your district completely online or using a hybrid format?
 - Do you have any previous experience teaching in a virtual format?
 - If not, what training did your district provide to help with your transition to distance learning?
- Part of Michigan's COVID-19 Response Plan required districts to create contingency plans for students with special needs. Please describe your experiences creating and facilitating those plans.
 - Do you feel they were effective in providing support to students?
 - How would you change them to better meet the needs of students?
- Please describe your interactions with students during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they differed from interactions in the traditional school setting?
 - How often were you able to connect with students?
 - What was the frequency in which students turned in completed work?
 - In your opinion, what do you feel was the most difficult part of distance learning for your students?
 - Did you notice any academic and/or emotional changes in your students during the mandatory school closure?
- Please describe your interactions with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic
 - How often were you able to connect with parents?
- In your opinion, what changes can school leaders make in the future to better meet the needs of students with special needs during long-term school closures?
 - What can school leaders do to better prepare staff members for long-term school closures in the future?

APPENDIX D



Graduate Studies and Research
Marquette, MI 49855-5301
906-227-2300
www.nmu.edu/graduatestudies/

Memorandum

TO: Bethney Bergh
School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service

CC: Travis Depuydt
School of Education, Leadership, and Public Service

DATE: November 3, 2020

FROM: Lisa Schade Eckert
Dean of Graduate Education and Research

SUBJECT: IRB Proposal: HS20-1147
IRB Approval Date: 11/3/2020
Proposed Project Dates: 10/30/2020 – 10/30/2021
“THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS”

Your proposal “THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TEACHER INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS” has been approved by the NMU Institutional Review Board. Include your proposal number (HS20-1147) on all research materials and on any correspondence regarding this project.

- A. If a subject suffers an injury during research, or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB chair (dereande@nmu.edu) and NMU’s IRB administrator (leckert@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Unanticipated Problem or Adverse Event Form for Research Involving Human Subjects.
- B. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.
- C. If you find that modifications of investigators, methods, or procedures are necessary, you must submit a Project Modification Form for Research Involving Human Subjects before collecting data. Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Until further guidance, per CDC guidelines, the PI is responsible for obtaining signatures on the COVID-19 Researcher Agreement and Release and COVID-19 Research Participant Agreement and Release forms.

All forms can be found at the NMU Grants and Research website: <http://www.nmu.edu/grantsandresearch/node/102>