Article

"Am I Doing Enough?" Special Educators' Experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching in Spring 2020

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Abstract: While the COVID-19 pandemic radically changed all aspects of everyone's life, the closure of schools was one of the most impactful, significantly altering daily life for school personnel, students, and families. The shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) presented particular challenges to special educators of students with significant support needs who often benefit from strong interpersonal connections, modeling, and the use of physical manipulatives. This paper details the experiences of two elementary special education teachers as they navigated the transition to ERT. The teachers reported three distinct stages of ERT: making contact, establishing routines, and transitioning to academics. They also discussed the challenges they faced during this period, such as the inequity in resources amongst their students, needing to rely on at-home support in order to meaningfully teach students, and changes in what it meant to be a teacher while having to teach online. While clearly not in favor of online learning, the teachers do present glimmers of hope, for example, with regards to increased communication between teachers and parents. The challenges and strategies used to overcome these challenges will be of use to educators in the coming months, with implications for distance learning in this population.

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2020, schools across the world shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving over 90% of children in the world without in-person schooling [1]. Schools and districts had to immediately adapt to a host of new concerns including ensuring the physical health and safety of students (for example, by providing food for those who had relied on school lunches), providing technology to families at home, and implementing quality educational techniques from a distance. This Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) [2] exacerbated concerns of educational equity, as students with fewer resources were less likely to have access to the technology needed to meaningfully engage in distance learning [3]. ERT also presented a heightened challenge for special education teachers, particularly those who teach students with significant support needs [4]. Given the issues of equity in ERT and the challenges inherent in online special education, it is crucial to learn more about the experiences of special educators during spring 2020 and understand how they dealt with ERT. We are particularly focused in this paper on the experiences of teachers whose students have significant support needs, and we are conscious of equity concerns for this group of learners.

1.1. Special Education and Distance Learning

While distance learning during COVID-19 presented challenges for special education teachers, online special education is not completely unheard of. Some research has focused on practical tips for teachers who are teaching online [5–8], while other studies have focused on how to organize an

online classroom (for example, Vasquez and Straub's [9] review of K-12 special education distance learning found that five out of six of the studies reviewed utilized only asynchronous sessions, while Sorenson [10] found that one-on-one online sessions were the most common instructional type in elementary school compared to higher grades).

Several studies have highlighted areas of potential benefits with regards to distance learning for students with disabilities. For example, having open access to course materials can facilitate repetition of material, such as watching a demonstration video multiple times [11]. For example, two studies found that university students who either were autistic or who scored high on an assessment of autism were more likely to prefer review of videos and blogs as opposed to interacting with peers and instructors than students who had fewer autistic tendencies [12,13]. In another study of adult students with learning disabilities, participants reported appreciating the flexibility and self-management in their online classroom and also reported not having to worry about social stressors around feeling "inferior" to other students [14]. A potential benefit with regards to distance learning in younger grades is that parents may have the opportunity to be more involved in their child's learning [10].

However, it is important to note that the majority of studies on K-12 special education distance learning were conducted with families who chose to enroll their child in distance learning. Therefore, the ERT of the COVID-19 pandemic is not synonymous with online/distance learning in general (see Hodges et al. [2] for a discussion of the differences at the university level). Given that online learning requires intrinsic motivation to stay engaged, parents may need to be involved at all times [15], especially if their child struggles with executive functioning and self-management [11]. This time commitment may be too much for some parents, even in times of societal normalcy [16,17]. The unexpectedness of the move to mandatory distance learning was thus a major transition for all stakeholders (e.g. teachers, students, and parents), presenting challenges above and beyond those normally inherent in distance learning.

It is also important to note that a large portion of research on special education distance learning appears to have been done with students with less significant support needs [18]. For example, in Vasquez and Straub's [9] review of online K-12 special education, none of the six empirical studies identified were conducted in self-contained classrooms (instead, they were in mainstream and resources classrooms, as well as an after school program). Much research on online learning for individuals with disabilities also seems to be focused on postsecondary learners (e.g. a recent review of K-12 online special education indicated that they had to exclude many articles focused on adult participants [19]). Research has also highlighted that even state special education directors have doubts regarding the ability of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to adequately ensure a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities who are receiving schooling online [20].

1.2. Students with Disabilities and the Current Crisis

Little research has been done with regards to the ERT brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the crisis began only months ago and is still ongoing. Several articles describe the loss of in-person schooling for students, particularly with regards to their mental health [21–23]. Lee [23] notes that this disruption can be particularly devastating to students with disabilities such as autism, who thrive on routine and regular schedules. Additionally, the lack of built-in social opportunities that come along with school can be detrimental to autistic students' social development [22]. A significant number of students with disabilities also have co-occurring mental health issues; for example, students with autism have much higher rates of anxiety than their general population counterparts [24]. Increased isolation and lack of mental health services may lead to exacerbation of mental health issues during this time [23]. A survey of UK parents of students with disabilities documented an increase in worry, anxiety, and isolation for these families [25]. Many parents reported that the changes they experienced when schools closed had a negative effect on their own mental health as well as that of their children. The authors sum up the situations for families,

> Staying at home, and in most cases not attending school, creates a uniquely stressful situation for children with [disabilities] and their families. Carefully developed routines have been disrupted; support networks have disintegrated; and parents have been asked to do a job that trained teachers find challenging, without any training.
>
> (para. 4 [25])

The same project also surveyed families about what kind of support they desired during COVID-19 [26]; families reported wanting (1) specialized professional advice on how to meet academic and mental health needs, (2) materials for home learning, and (3) provision of opportunities to "see familiar faces." Similarly, parents in the United States report wanting recommendations for dealing with challenging behavioral issues and increasing motivation for school while at home [27]. Though some scholars have put forth suggestions and strategies for parents [28], many parents may feel that they have to balance too many competing responsibilities [29] to implement such strategies effectively.

ERT not only transformed students' and parents' lives, but teachers' as well. In an interview study of twenty-four general education teachers in the U.K., teachers discussed feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about their student's safety and access to resources, as well as concerns about grading [30]. As we prepared this manuscript, we found only one study that analyzed the perspective of special education teachers during COVID-19 ERT, and none were set in the US. Iivari et al. [31] documented the experiences of special education teachers in India and a widening digital divide based not only on disability but also on the socioeconomic class of students. While increasing student engagement was challenging, the teachers did note that some parents and students did do well during the lockdown, provided they could implement and follow a routine. Access to technology is also a major factor in ERT, affecting both families and teachers [32].

1.3. Current Study

Given the novelty of the situation into which special educators were thrust, and the likelihood that teachers will be faced with the prospect of teaching online in the near future, it is crucial to understand more about their experiences. Therefore, the current study was an exploratory, qualitative study aimed at learning more about what it was like to teach during spring 2020's ERT through qualitative analysis of the experiences of two special education teachers. More specifically, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How did Emergency Remote Teaching evolve over the course of the spring 2020 semester?
2. What problems emerged for teachers of young students with disabilities?
3. How, and to what extent, were those problems handled?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Three elementary teachers participated in this study, though this paper focuses only on two of them. Data from the third teacher was focused on a different student population (analysis of this teachers' experiences can be found elsewhere) [33]. The two teachers whose data is presented herein, Belen and Rose (pseudonyms, both female), worked at the same school in the same district in a large, urban city in the Western US. Their school had a predominantly (over 90%) Hispanic/Latinx student body, with over approximately 70% of students socioeconomically disadvantaged, 18% English language learners, and 15% students with disabilities. Belen and Rose both taught self-contained special education classes for students with disabilities with significant support needs. Rose taught grades 1–2; Belen taught grades 3–5. The most common disabilities in Rose's class were autism, intellectual disability, and speech-language impairment, while those in Belen's class all met criteria for autism. Both teachers had nine students, mostly boys. Both have Educational Specialist (Moderate/Severe) credentials.

Belen had been teaching for five years (though she worked for 15 years prior as a paraprofessional); Rose had been teaching for six. Belen and Rose have both been teaching at the same school for the duration of their teaching careers.

Prior to participating in the current investigation, Belen and Rose had participated in a research project regarding mathematics teaching with students with disabilities with the second author and were both active participants in ongoing professional development on Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI) [34]. Both were named by district personnel as exceptional special education teachers.

2.2. Interview Procedure & Analysis

Because we were seeking insight into a novel phenomenon, we designed exploratory interviews, as we could not know what exactly to ask about in advance [35]. Due to the challenging nature of facilitating exploratory interviews, the second author conducted the interviews, given her prior experience interviewing teachers [36,37] and her decade of experience teaching students with disabilities. The interviews with Belen and Rose were conducted in April 2020, approximately three weeks after school buildings closed. Belen's interview lasted approximately 35 min, while Rose's was 20 min. While a semi-structured interview protocol that was based on the second author's expertise as well as a literature review of extant research on online learning for students with disabilities was prepared to guide the interview's major themes, the interviews were exploratory and took an informal conversational tone [38], with initial questions asking generally how teachers were doing (e.g., "How's it going?"). Other questions on the protocol included: What concerns do you have at the moment? What supports do you feel you need? On-the-spot follow-up questions were used to explore emergent issues in the teacher's practice during ERT.

In order to recognize patterns within our data, we utilized a thematic analysis, using an inductive approach [39]. We took an inductive approach due to the novel nature of our topic and research questions. Though we had reviewed the literature on online special education prior to analysis, it did not provide us with enough of a theoretical orientation to code deductively. Analysis began with both authors open coding and then focused coding the interviews [40]. Open coding refers to themes and ideas that a coder thinks of during a first pass through an interview transcript. Focused coding occurs after the initial codes are reviewed and summarized, such that coding at this stage applies the same coding scheme to all data. Both authors separately identified themes across participants; codes were then compared amongst the two authors and discrepancies resolved. We then created a memo (Interview 1 Themes Memo) that summarized the themes of the first set of interviews.

Our second interview was a focus group, again exploratory in design as the teachers were still in the process of adapting to novel conditions. This uncertainty necessitates exploratory methods with a skilled interviewer [35]. We began again with open-ended prompts (e.g., "How is it going?" and "What's changed?") to elicit any shifts since the first interview. We then asked questions based on the themes identified in Interview 1 Themes Memo. Again, because of the emergent nature of the phenomenon under investigation, we were intentionally exploratory in our questioning to allow for unanticipated responses. For example, when a teacher brought up the way parents think about their children who are in special education, the interviewer encouraged more discussion on that topic by asking, "What are you seeing about how these parents think about their kids and their learning?" Themes from the individual interviews, such as the early theme of parent over-involvement, were presented to the participants as a member check.

Following the focus group, the first and second author coded all focus group data using the existing themes from the individual interviews. Open coding was used to look for new themes within the focus group data. All data were then reviewed again using focused coding with all codes from both the interviews and the focus group. Data were sorted into categories for further analysis, determining if the category described all data within it [41] When the first draft of the findings was complete, the draft was sent to the teachers again for feedback as a second member check. We used member

checks in this research because the topic is emergent, and we wanted to ensure we were accurately capturing their perspective. This also serves as a form of respondent validation [42].

3. Findings

This section reports first on the different stages of teaching through which the teachers navigated. Second, we explore the challenges the teachers faced in terms of connecting with families and introducing effective teaching practices.

3.1. Stages of Emergency Remote Teaching during Spring 2020

Belen and Rose described three main stages of teaching during this spring's ERT. The first was making initial contact with families and setting up the technology. Academics were not the focus during the first stage. The second phase entailed establishing routines within students' homes and a focus on socio-emotional well-being. The third phase consisted of the teachers beginning to include more academics. Though Belen and Rose both progressed through stage two before stage three, there was considerable overlap between those two stages as the teachers saw both socio-emotional and academic goals as paramount to their teaching.

3.1.1. Stage One: Making Contact

For the first one to two weeks after school abruptly closed, teachers were focused mostly on making contact with students and their families. Efforts in these first weeks focused on ensuring all families felt supported and had access to the technology necessary to engage in online distance learning. As Belen described,

> It was more trying to meet with them or talk to them, to how can I come and support you? What is going on? So it was a check in all last week. This week, it was again now doing even manual phone calls to every family to get this same kind of idea of where they're at.

Rose similarly said, "The first week, it was kind of me talking to the parents mostly. Okay, trying to get the parents connected. I was able to send home like a couple resources for online learning."

Belen and Rose's school was able to allocate an iPad to each student, which were available via pick-up during this period. However, teachers had trouble reaching some families, and not all picked up the devices immediately. Belen had trouble getting in touch with one parent and hoped that he would be able to pick up the iPad: "So I was able to talk finally with one parent who I couldn't get a hold of. And finally, he called . . . hopefully [he'll be] able to come and pick up an iPad from school . . . And I shared with him, I think the most important piece is for your son to see me and to see his peers." Rose reported that by week three, she had been in touch with all families and "no one's like a ghost" anymore.

While the district was initially busy ensuring all students had access to the technology and food, during this time, Belen and Rose felt that they had little idea what they should focus on academically, how they might provide services, and, legally, how IEP services would work. They began wondering about what their goals would be during ERT and what equitable solutions they could implement. However, at this stage, parents were primarily concerned with their children's emotional states and subsequent behaviors. The teachers described upset parents with children whose routines were upended. Belen described "that it's changed the routine on the students. So when [parents] try to get them to do work at home, it's a big, big behavior outbursts, like, we never do work at home." With this in mind, both teachers realized the need for routine and structure at home in order to effectively teach their students.

3.1.2. Stage Two: Establishing Routines

Stage two began about two weeks after the closing of physical schools as teachers began to provide additional services for students. By this point, focus was shifted away from the paper packets

sent home at the beginning of the school closure, and the teachers both began to rely on the school's Digital Learning System (DLS) for communication and academics. Now that the majority of families were connected, this stage focused on creating new routines at home in order to support learning, as well as the teachers developing their own routines on how to provide instruction to students. Though there was initial resistance from some students on schooling from home, Belen described needing to establish a "new normal . . . then I can start introducing the things that we were actually doing in class, like, okay, now you guys are going to go and do a counting collection, because they're so familiar with those things." Rose mentioned a similar sentiment, saying, "It's hard for me just to be, like, come on, we're going to do math now, right?... Like, they need to know there's a beginning and end."

Both teachers emphasized wanting to make families feel comfortable during this unprecedented time. Both began holding individual and group meetings via Zoom. At the beginning, Belen said, "Right now I just want the parents to feel comfortable. And I said the standard is I just want the students to be able to see their peers. So I'm not putting any expectations as far as this is work time, yet." Similarly, Rose also put parents' stress at the forefront of her teaching, ensuring that parents and students were at least able to access the online content before working on more academic skills: "So just slow, like not trying to overwhelm parents and kind of doing, like, one week at a time, like, hey, our goal this week is for you to access this resource. Please try it at home, please let me know if you're not able to do it so I can help you troubleshoot."

As time went on, both teachers saw more students and families attend the Zoom meetings. These meetings became more structured and consisted of games, stories, and check-ins using the format of Morning Meetings [43]. Belen described,

> Today was the first time I kind of attempted to create a routine through this format and do part of my Morning Meeting, which is just, today, all I did was take attendance and choose the greeter of the day. So, from the four kids that were there, I asked one to say good morning to all of them. So that was the greeter. And they had to wait for the other person to respond and say, 'Good morning.' When I took attendance, I did like I do in class, and the expectation is they have to raise their hand and say, 'I'm here.'

Setting up this kind of routine was crucial to the success of Belen's students, with one parent telling her, "this four days a week, thirty minutes is the closest to school that my son gets. So yes, I want the four days because that sets us up for the rest of our day." Rose also highly valued the social aspect of synchronous learning, saying, "Like, even if they can't do the more interactive stuff or do responses or upload their own work, like, at least I can see them and they can see each other."

3.1.3. Stage Three: Transitioning to Academics

The transition from setting routines to engaging students in academics was not a smooth one. Belen discussed feeling a tension between her high academic expectations that she normally set for her students and the reality of her families' drastically shifted lifestyles. She described her "crude reality" as she realized she would not be able to do everything she wanted via distance learning:

> Let me start doing what we do in class, right? Let's get them involved in, let's do the counting collections. Let's do routines in this [digital] platform, but then my crude reality, and that was a shocker for me, [is] trying to do the 15 min with the students and the behaviors, running around, jumping up and down or having a lot of stim behaviors and just getting them to focus or to sit . . . Okay, I might be asking too much for my kiddos right now. This is not their new norm. And here I am, like here, I'm ready to teach, guys. And they're like, no, you're, you can't come into my house and have me work now. . . . So that's my, that was my reality. So it's, like, okay, I need to tone it down.

While this initial attempt at incorporating academics was unsuccessful, by the time of the focus group, roughly 6 weeks after the beginning of ERT, Belen was meeting her students on Zoom four days a

week for 30 min at a time. Part of her meetings were devoted to work designed to emulate the classroom "centers" for English language, art, math, and other subjects. She was also meeting parents one-on-one if they desired additional support, particularly in the area of managing challenging behaviors. By this point, Rose was also meeting families individually for behavioral support consultations and was also holding daily "morning meetings" via Zoom. Whereas the meetings were first focused on social activities (e.g., stories, songs), they were gradually shifted to a more academic curriculum, while still preserving the social emotional goals of a Morning Meeting. In addition to the synchronous Zoom meetings, both teachers also uploaded activities to the DLS for families to access and implement at home. The curriculum for both teachers included reading stories, phonics exercises, writing activities, and counting collections. Belen described her plan for introducing counting collections at home: "Yes, I think that would be a fun, first real math activity. Have something, something that you already have at home, prepare it ahead of time for them. Like that's gonna be your homework, and then record it and then we just get together and we share." Rose began using the Zoom annotation feature to engage her students in her meetings by having them indicate choices on the screen.

Though Belen and Rose attempted to incorporate more academics into their teaching, both struggled with juggling between socio-emotional and academic goals throughout the entire ERT period. When faced with this challenge, Rose also felt the need to shift perspectives in terms of what was expected for each student based on feasibility:

> What can I do so that I can provide something to those students that's, like... they don't need to, like, create a response? They don't need to really do anything, but just be there. Like, just being there is enough or just watching it is enough.

This echoes a quote from Belen in the previous section, in which she tells a parent that the most important thing is for his son to simply see his teacher and peers. Both Belen and Rose were constantly balancing the socio-emotional needs of their students and their families with the desire to push them academically.

3.2. Major Challenges with Emergency Remote Teaching

When trying to work with families to establish new routines, maintain academic skills previously learned, and teach new material, the teachers described multiple hurdles. These challenges were interleaved throughout all of the aforementioned stages, from initially making contact to setting up new routines to including more rigorous academics. The main challenges that emerged from the teachers' interviews were (1) inequity inherent in ERT; (2) providing adequate support to families under duress; and (3) changes in the teaching experience.

3.2.1. Inequity of Support and Resources at Home

The inequity of resources and access to technology was a common topic amongst the teachers. There was wide variation in the amount of support students were given at home. Some students consistently had an adult working alongside them all day (5/9 of Belen's students; 3/9 of Rose's), whereas other students did not receive any one-on-one school assistance at all (2/9 students for both teachers). The remaining students sometimes had adult support, but not consistently. Rose described some of the various situations her students faced, saying:

> And not to be, like, not to penalize anyone, because, like I said, it's not equitable. And I have students at home that, their parents aren't home, like, they're essential workers, grandmas, they're watching four little kids, one with, you know, severe autism and, like,... how can I expect her to be the teacher, right?

This clearly created inequities for the teachers' students with the most significant support needs, who needed assistance getting out a device, turning on the necessary online programs, and engaging

meaningfully with Zoom or the DLS (only one of the 18 total students was able to engage without adult support). Many caregivers were still working at this time, either from home or outside the home as essential workers. Food insecurity and other economic realities were stark. Rose specifically highlighted the fact that distribution of resources is not equitable at home as it is at school:

> And also, like, I'm always thinking about equity, right, like right now it's so glaring the kids that have the resources and have parents who can spend time with them to learn at home, and the kids that don't have that ... the justice angle of this, like, we all need to keep in the back of our heads, like, and kind of the, I guess, the attitude right now is, like, yeah, we get that it's not, it's not equitable. It's not going to be equitable. But we, just, we're going to teach the kids that are showing up.

Later on, during the focus group, she elaborated, discussing how learning from home can present issues for disenfranchised students by forcing them to be responsible for things outside of their control.

Belen gave examples of such inequity by discussing the difficulties some parents had logging on to the online portals and even getting access to the internet. She described one mom who, "At first ... didn't have internet, then she couldn't, didn't, have a device. Finally, we got her a device. Now she has internet, she didn't have a phone number, she didn't have an email. I have to still help her to get all those things in place. And, and, but I haven't been able to see the student on Zoom." She also described another family whose problems were not solved by simply having access to her child's school-issued tablet:

> [She said] 'Oh, that is a very nice thing you guys are doing, but right now' she says, 'We both got laid off,' like, her husband and her, 'from this coronavirus, so' and she says they owe money to Comcast, so they can't even jump into the free WiFi because she feels like they already have a tab with them. So they couldn't get the free, the free internet during this time. And she doesn't have a device either. And on their phone, I believe they don't have data either. So it's not, like, I can join her on Zooms through her phone. They only have call. And that's, yeah. There's a lot of challenges just to, to get everybody on the same page.

3.2.2. Reliance on At-Home Support

One of the major changes that occurred with ERT was that these special education teachers now had to rely on support from parents or other caregivers to facilitate education. The students in their classrooms had significant support needs, and in most cases required support from an adult or older child to engage in educational activities. This theme is composed of three subthemes: learning at school versus home; parents as educational partners; and teaching students with limited adult support.

Learning at School versus Home. Distance learning created an opportunity for the teachers to see their students in a new light: their home environment. By witnessing students working at home, interacting with family members, the teachers realized that not all of the work they had been doing in the classroom was being translated to the home. Rose described a student who, at school, "gets along well, he communicates well, he knows, he knows what to do. He's, he's doing it. ... I see that same student at home now and I was like, wow, ... [he] is not plugged into his world in a way that he seems like when he's at school." This may be related to the fact that parents and teachers have different roles in children's lives, as well as different expectations. According to Rose:

> I think just generally, at home, the expectation is different for a lot of my students. Not all but many. Like, I just sent home worksheets. And [a parent said], 'I didn't think he could do it, I wasn't gonna give it to him, but he knows exactly what to do.' And I'm like, 'Yeah, like, he understands that skill.'

Whereas Rose brought up issues of engagement and independence, Belen saw her students exhibit an increase in challenging behaviors due to the disruption in their routines: "The behaviors again

that we're seeing is that their routine has been broken and the, whether it's aggression, just a high level of non-compliance and throwing tantrums at home because they don't want to do the work." Rose acknowledged that some of her students' parents struggled with getting their child to sit down to do school work.

These issues regarding expectations (both academic or behavioral) were not as salient in Belen's and Rose's in-person classrooms, likely due to the fact that expectations had been set from the beginning of the school year, and the teachers were able to apply strategies to address problems that arose. It was therefore important for the teachers to realize that buy-in from parents, at least those who were able to be regularly involved in the ERT, was crucial in order to reach their students.

Parents as Educational Partners. Both Belen and Rose acknowledged that parents are usually not trained in behavioral and learning strategies in the same way that classroom teachers and paraprofessionals are. To address this, Belen decided to offer one-on-one Zoom sessions with parents in order to give suggestions and feedback tailored to each individual student, similar to the training she would do with a paraprofessional:

> So I told one dad, even if we were to have one-on-one Zoom meetings, where I can sit with both of you and your wife, and whatever things that are happening at home, that you're struggling to figure out how to manage; we can troubleshoot.

She saw this as an opportunity to bridge gaps between classroom and home:

> This is, like, the time for me and the parents to really be on the same page and teach them. When we're in the classroom, I never really get those opportunities for them to come; let's practice this, let's do it together.

Not all efforts to include parents in teaching went smoothly, however, especially with regards to parental implementation of more complex teaching strategies, such as the constructivist mathematics taught by these teachers. According to the teachers, teaching mathematics means developing a carefully trained eye for noticing the mathematics in what students do and building on what students understand. Rose discussed how she sent home videos of students doing math in her class, but felt it would be difficult for parents to understand why, for example, she might allow a student to make a mistake and let them try to correct it themselves. Both Belen and Rose discussed the difficulties of trying to convey their approach to mathematics to their students' parents, and the issues inherent with assuming that parents can take on the role of being their child's teacher. This crisis represented a shift in roles for the teachers. Not only were they now expected to provide instruction online, they were also trying to design professional development for parents in a much more involved way than ever before.

Teaching Students with Limited Adult Support. While the teachers did their best to involve parents in the educational process, as mentioned earlier, there was wide variation in the amount of support students were given at home. Not all students had an adult working alongside them all day. In Belen's class, two out of her nine students were unable to access the DLS without constant parent support and prompting. Rose describes how she made videos for the students with significant support needs who did not have sufficient support: "And just trying to think of what can I put out for them so that if they don't have the supervision to interact, and they don't have the skills they need to interact on their own, they can just watch." Rose also said, " . . . I want to make sure that we're putting content out that the kids that aren't able to show up can have, can just watch, like, they know their teacher is there." This was emotionally troubling for Rose, as she tried to provide for students who needed, but were not being given, one-on-one adult support.

3.2.3. Changes in the Teaching Experience

Beyond the challenge of trying to teach parents how to implement educational strategies and/or having to worry about reaching students who had limited adult support, Belen and Rose also faced additional changes in how their teaching looked during ERT. The subtheme of changes in the teaching

experience had three subthemes: teaching through a screen; accountability, grading, and attendance; and shifting work conditions.

Teaching through a Screen. During ERT, digital interfaces mediated all interactions between students and teachers. While technology allowed interaction, it took away relational aspects of teaching and learning that were upsetting to the teachers. Rose spoke of the screen as a massive barrier to communication and pedagogy. She noted that, for her young students, teaching relies on modeling and encouraging joint attention. Without the ability to use manipulatives, model what to do, and direct her students' attention with her eyes and body, Rose saw her students struggle, even with activities she knew they had mastered. For example, with regards to 10 frames, she said, "Like, he can do that. But when it turns into a screen, match the 10 frame in the number, like, that becomes harder for him to demonstrate, like, he knows that skill." Something fundamental was missing when she was not sitting next to the students, working with them.

Furthermore, it is not only interaction with teachers that shapes learning, but with peers as well. Belen and Rose were both very concerned with students coming to the synchronous Zoom meetings so they could see their peers. Belen described seeing each other via Zoom as "reassuring"—"a sense of, yeah, it's like, okay, everything's gonna be okay. And even if our students are non-verbal, like I noticed was with my student today that came in, once he started seeing us and seeing more, he, you can see his demeanor and him sitting." She said of the same student, "It's like he, he saw his friends. And when I had one of the friends talk to each one of them . . . you can see that light up like, 'Oh, there. Oh, I'm seeing you.' So it's also, I think, a sense of comfort and joy to see each other."

Accountability, Grading, and Attendance. The teachers described a tension around accountability that they found difficulty to manage. They knew that students needed accountability and feedback but were unsure of how to go about providing it. According to Rose, the lack of accountability and feedback made students who were doing work feel like "they're just shooting the work off into the ether." She also acknowledged that "for a lot of parents, um, it might be nice just to be like, 'Hey, do this small thing and then we're gonna come back and talk about it.' So it's not just like, it feels like we're doing it for a reason." Yet to hold students and parents accountable for schoolwork when their home situations were out of their control felt inequitable as well, with Belen saying, "Well, how do we grade our students? Because it almost seems like we are grading the parents."

This issue also presented itself even during synchronous Zoom sessions, with Rose explaining:

> But that's what I am kind of nervous about, even in a small group with one other kid, like, 'Oh, hey, buddy, it looks like you didn't do any work this week.' Like, like, how do I navigate that? Like, how do I offer feedback and, you know, revisit work that they've done, but also not make anyone feel bad for not doing the work because that's not where I want to go either.

Shifting Work Conditions. Both teachers brought up the fact that they felt personal changes in their jobs as teachers as a result of the pandemic and resultant ERT. Given everyone's heightened stress, the increased focus on socio-emotional support, and uncertainty regarding academic progress, Belen wondered, "Am I doing enough? Is there something I should be doing, something I could be doing better? It just feels like we have to do it all."

Belen and Rose both commented on the number of virtual meetings they were expected to attend each day, on top of their teaching responsibilities. While Belen saw the potential benefit of these meetings, she also felt that it was a sense of anxiety driving her to attend them, worried that she might miss out on important information:

> It almost feels like it's almost a panic mode for us as well, almost like when you go and overstock and start buying everything, that's how it feels with this. It's like, I need to go to everything and get all the info.

For Rose, not only were the meetings inconvenient, but they were a poor replacement for the face-to-face contact she loved engaging in with her students:

And it's been really tough for me. It's like all the favorite parts of my job, I don't really get to do anymore. Like being with the kids and, like, I don't know, just being in my classroom and, like, being around that energy has just been, like, stripped away. And I feel like I'm left with a lot of the parts I don't love, like, all the meetings and all, like, the long term planning and just, like, the little tediousness of making stuff for them to do is what I feel like I'm doing right now. So it's, it's been an adjustment for me, personally.

Similar to how the teachers focused on making families comfortable, Belen made sure to note the importance of self-care, saying, "We need to give ourselves that time also to, to process, because it seems like now we're connected all day on these devices."

4. Discussion

The abrupt shift from in-person learning to ERT in spring 2020 was deeply unsettling for the special education teachers in this study. Not only did it present major challenges in promoting their students' academic achievement, it also led to an increase in familial socio-emotional stress. Throughout the three stages of ERT, both Belen and Rose did what they could to address their two competing goals: supporting students and families socio-emotionally and furthering academic achievement. This tension was compounded by the issue of inequity of resources.

As the teachers reflected, we found that they were able to identify how critical person-to-person learning was, now that they had lost it. They reflected on how important it was to be near a student who was close to giving up, how important holding manipulatives in your hand was to children's learning. In the focus group, Belen noted that they were just starting to get into a groove with ERT. Rose responded with passion—"But I don't want to get into this groove." She noted the pervasive equity problems with distance learning, particularly for her students with significant disabilities, and also noted her concern that, because distance learning was cheaper, any success they had might be used to replace in-person teaching. She noted, "The goal should be to get back in the classroom and get back to, like, small group, in-person, face to face learning, and, like, that classroom culture."

The teachers echoed previous researchers' assertions that online learning can be quite demanding for parents of children with significant support needs [16,17], particularly during a time of widespread stress. While it is clear that these teachers do not believe it reasonable to expect parents to act as teachers, it is encouraging that both teachers used this time to work one-on-one with parents, sharing strategies with them that they might not have had time for otherwise (which is in line with Sorensen's [10] claim that parents whose children engage in online learning might have enhanced knowledge of their child's educational plan).

4.1. Implications for Stakeholders

Our findings present multiple practical implications for teachers and school administrators. First and foremost, though, we offer these stories to honor the incredibly hard work of teachers in the spring of 2020 and to offer solidarity and inspiration to others planning online learning as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. We believe it is important to acknowledge teachers' work during this time when many of them may be feeling lonely and disconnected from their work [30], a sentiment echoed by our participants. It is important that special education teachers are exposed to stories of others going through the same process.

Belen and Rose's stories also hold implications for administrators planning the continuation of online and/or hybrid learning. Clearly, access to technology is a huge issue with which to contend, making it difficult for teachers, especially those with students who need intensive supports from parents, to deliver high quality instruction and maintain supervision of IEP goal progress. This, of course, can have legal ramifications, adding additional uncertainty and stress for teachers. Administrators may also want to be cognizant of what kind (and amount) of professional development is provided to teachers. While training in supporting students who develop trauma as a result of the pandemic [44]

will likely alleviate some stressors, it is also important to note that the teachers in the current study felt overwhelmed by the number of resources and trainings provided. We recommend targeted professional development for the specific needs of educators teaching students with significant support needs.

Another important take-away from our findings is the importance of parent-teacher collaboration and communication. While this is always an important aspect of teachers' work [45,46], the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how crucial those relationships are. While recruiting parental engagement is helpful to general education teachers as well [47], as special educators, Belen and Rose felt the need to educate parents to implement educational techniques and strategies, all the while recognizing that parent and teacher expectations are not always aligned. Though they had varying levels of success in this endeavor, it highlights the importance of teachers and parents being on the same page. For teachers continuing to teach online during the pandemic, it may be helpful to try to implement a system similar to the *Partners in School* intervention that was developed pre-COVID to improve the coordinated use of evidence-based practices at school and at home [48]. This might include explicitly discussing the students' strengths, challenges, and preferences at the beginning of any instructional period; identifying one or two specific goals to work on; and highlighting evidence-based practices that can be used to address such goals, including any instructional accommodations that might be necessary. Though the daily note between home and school used in the *Partners in School* program may not always be feasible, keeping lines of communication open is key in order to monitor not only student but also parent progress. Though teachers are likely trying to implement many of these things already, having a clear, executable plan ahead of time is likely to alleviate some of the uncertainty and stress felt by parents and students.

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

Though our study is one of the first to highlight the experiences and perspectives of special educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several limitations to highlight. First, this paper presents a case study of only two teachers. We cannot therefore assume our findings are generalizable to other educators (though they are in line with other emergent literature on education during COVID-19 [30,47]). This is especially true given the fact that Belen and Rose are both experienced educators who were identified as skilled teachers within their district. Other teachers may face entirely different challenges. More research must therefore be conducted with a larger and more diverse group of special education teachers. For example, it may be useful to compare rural versus urban, elementary versus high school, and senior versus novice teachers' experiences with ERT. However, it is important to note that the students served by these teachers (i.e. minorities with low average socioeconomic status) are usually underrepresented in this field [49,50].

Another limitation of the current study was that we did not use previously validated interview instruments and instead conducted exploratory, semi-structured interviews. While this type of interview guide was necessary under the emergent conditions of COVID in order to gather data on individual's experiences and perspectives [38], it may be useful for future studies to use validated measures in order to increase consistency amongst participants, especially if a larger study is conducted. This will also allow for results to be compared to pre-COVID-19 studies that used the same instrument. Findings can also be strengthened via data triangulation [51], for instance, by interviewing parents or reviewing student work produced during ERT.

Finally, while we were specifically focused on understanding teachers' perspectives as events surrounding school closures unfolded, it is also necessary to now have teachers reflect on these events retroactively and understand how they will use their experiences with ERT in future teaching. Similarly, because we were probing for an overview of Belen and Rose's experiences, we were not able to explore any particular theme in detail. Researchers must therefore do a more in-depth investigation of the specific themes discussed in this paper. For example, what were the experiences of other special education teachers in terms of having parents implement educational strategies? How did changes in

parent-teacher communication and expectations affect parent-teacher relationships? And what does this mean for teachers moving forward?

5. Conclusions

Like these teachers, we agree that online, distance learning for students with significant support needs is not equitable, especially when it is hoisted upon families and teachers against their will. However, given the ongoing global pandemic, teachers and families must continue to adjust to these changes. We hope special educators and the families they work with can take some amount of solace from knowing that they are not alone in this struggle. Tweaks to the provision of online special education will be needed on a consistent basis, particularly in the areas of access to technology and provision of academic and socio-emotional supports for both teachers and families. At the end of the day, the findings from this preliminary case study speak to the importance of strong parent-teacher ties and will hopefully encourage more research in this area.

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