

# From Crisis to Opportunity: Family Partnerships with Special Education Preservice Teachers in Remote Practicum During the COVID-19 School Closures

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## Abstract

Challenges for culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 school closures, highlighting major social and educational inequities. In response to this educational crisis, our university partnered with a community organization that supports immigrant families and their children with disabilities to provide them with individualized instruction while also providing preservice special education teachers with practicum field experiences. Situated in New York City, this qualitative study explored the experiences of preservice teachers, mothers, and their children with disabilities who participated in remote instruction during the initial COVID-19 school closures. We analyzed focus group interviews of preservice teachers and their journal entries, as well as individual interviews with mothers and their children with disabilities. This study details the successes and challenges of this novel teaching and learning partnership during the pandemic and the implications of reimagining field experiences in special education teacher education programs to cultivate educators who are equipped technologically and prepared to build relationship-centered family partnerships.

Key Words: COVID-19, remote instruction, family partnerships, special education practicum, preservice teachers, field experience, culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities

## Introduction and Literature Review

New York City (NYC) has been one of the cities hardest hit by COVID-19 with over 900,000 cases at the time of writing this article (NYC Health COVID-19 Data). In March 2020, NYC schools abruptly closed, impacting the education of over 1.1 million children and over 75,000 teachers (Shapiro, 2020). The closures exacerbated inequities in education that already existed for children with disabilities receiving special education services, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Nadworny, 2020), and their families experienced extra burdens during the abrupt switch to remote instruction (Klass, 2020). Moreover, the closures impacted preservice teachers' field experience in special education, and many were unable to continue their practicum, critical for building essential teaching skills.

Tying together the needs of these communities, we, as field supervisors in a university teacher preparation program, connected culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities to preservice teachers in a special education teacher preparation program who provided individualized remote instruction to the children. In this study, we explore the collaborative experiences of the preservice teachers, mothers, and students with disabilities in remote instruction. First, we provide a brief review of the literature on the importance of practicum fieldwork for preservice teachers, parent–teacher collaboration in special education, and remote learning in general and for students with disabilities, particularly during emergency situations. Then, we analyze the benefits and challenges of this collaborative process, which provided meaningful field experiences for preservice teachers and educational support for culturally and linguistically diverse families and their children with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis in NYC.

### Practicum in Special Education

Darling-Hammond (2014) stated that practicum field experience in teacher preparation is the “holy grail” and one of the most powerful tools for improving the quality and competence of future teachers. As preservice teachers engage in meaningful and contextualized teaching practices, they reflect on their own practices and connect theory to practice (Fewster, 2012; Naughton, 2016; Samaras, 2000; Tsui et al., 2020). Scholars in teacher education concur on the importance of providing field-based teaching practice under close supervision so preservice teachers may learn to negotiate tensions and dilemmas in actual classroom spaces (Cohen et al., 2013; Henry, 2016; Macy et al., 2009). Particularly in special education teacher education, there is a strong emphasis on practicum because “field experience is the best vehicle to prepare

future teachers for the complexity and diversity of the classroom” (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014, p. 255).

In a review of special education teacher preparation programs, Brownell and colleagues (2005) cited “extensive field experiences” as a main characteristic of effective programs. In such field experiences, preservice teachers apply knowledge gained from coursework in the field. For the current study, we define practicum field experience as teaching activities completed in the field (i.e., classroom or community settings), beyond the walls of teacher preparation courses, over a number of predetermined hours, and guided by mentor teachers and university faculty. Specific skills implemented in the field can include differentiated instruction, explicit instruction, accommodation and modification, applied behavior analysis, culturally responsive–sustaining practices, and other evidence-based education strategies. In addition, preservice teachers can learn to collaborate with myriad stakeholders, such as cooperating teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, administrators, other school personnel, and families (Fewster, 2012). Thus, practicum field experience provides preservice teachers with extensive training and real-life application of instruction and collaboration (Billingsley & Scheuermann, 2014).

### **Collaborating with Families of Students with Disabilities**

Partnering with families and communities is especially critical when working with students with diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities (Accardo et al., 2020; Miller, 2019), considering almost 50% enrolled in special education are from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families and historically and contemporarily minoritized backgrounds (Waitoller, 2014). Yet, many teacher preparation programs are challenged in providing meaningful experiences for preservice teachers to build partnerships with families and communities of diverse backgrounds (Collier et al., 2015). In a review of special education and general education teacher preparation programs, Brownell and colleagues (2015) found programs often omitted family collaboration although it is an integral part of effective teaching and a necessary skill to develop.

In special education, family collaboration is essential as parents are an integral part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) legally requires parent participation, accountability, and consent in the IEP process. Besides obtaining consent for placement and services, schools are obligated by law to notify parents regarding their child’s progress toward IEP goals and in the curriculum through frequent progress reports (IDEA, 2004). In this sense, learning how to collaborate and communicate with families is one of the most essential aspects of special education teacher preparation.

According to Goldman and Burke (2019), parent involvement in special education includes the following activities: (1) parent advocacy, (2) collaborative partnerships, (3) home–school communication, (4) school-based participation, and (5) home-based participation. Parent–school collaboration can be defined as “parent/family and teacher/school working together with mutual respect, trust, and equality on behalf of the child” (Goldman & Burke, 2019, p. 111). Collaborative partnership activities can include asking parents for their opinions, shared decision making, incorporating parent ideas and concerns into the IEP, and working on student goals in the home setting. Parent involvement and collaboration is critical to student success as it can increase student achievement, improve attendance, and decrease behavior concerns and drop-out rates (Goldman & Burke, 2019). Despite this, there are many barriers, such as parent ideas and suggestions not being considered and teachers not regularly communicating with parents (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). These may be exacerbated for CLD parents of children with disabilities who receive special education services (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). CLD families are often marginalized during the special education process because schools may lack culturally responsive-sustaining practices, do not provide language interpreters or translations of crucial documents (despite federal requirements mandating the provision of interpreters for IEP meetings), schedule meetings at inconvenient times, and do not respect family as experts or value their contributions to their children’s education (Rossetti et al., 2017; Syeda & Dresens, 2020).

To minimize these barriers, it is imperative that preservice teachers learn strategies for engaging in effective parent–school collaboration. However, there exists a problematic gap in teacher preparation programs in experiences that build these skills (Collier et al., 2015). Zeichner (2010) asserted this gap could be bridged through providing preservice teachers opportunities to participate in communities, beyond traditional school spaces. Such experiences highlight the benefits of leveraging contextualized understandings of students’ lives and community members’ knowledge and expertise. Zygmunt and colleagues (2018) examined a teacher education program that created opportunities for preservice teachers to develop a pedagogy of care and connection through community engagement. The preservice teachers were paired with mentors who were leaders, parents, or elders in the community, and their fieldwork activities were prioritized by the needs of the community. Through this approach, preservice teachers reflected on and challenged their conceptions of “race, culture, power, and privilege” (Zygmunt et al., 2018, p. 135). The partnerships allowed them to dismantle preconceptions and transform deficit perspectives towards marginalized communities. As shown in the study, engaging with families and communities provides “hybrid spaces” (p. 89) for preservice teachers to connect

theory and practice in more contextualized situations (Zeichner, 2010). In a comparison study, Accardo and colleagues (2020) found that special education preservice teachers who worked with families during their teacher education program expressed greater understanding of the collaborative process with parents and more effective communication methods than those who did not collaborate with families during their program.

### **Promoting Equity in Remote Instruction and Online Environments**

Meeting the needs of CLD families with children with disabilities in remote settings can bring unique challenges. According to Kirkland (2020), similar to in-person instruction, it is important to create culturally responsive—sustaining remote education for CLD students and their families. One premise of his guidance for creating such education is the use of both technological tools and tools outside technology. Kirkland mentioned people as a tool outside technology and urged educators to consider family and community as integral parts of remote learning. He suggested educators conduct participatory lesson planning with students, parents, and other educators who can provide insights into the students' unique needs. When teaching remotely, frequent communication through phone or video calls is also vital, as in-person meetings may not be possible, and individualized, student-centered lessons are necessary to meet the diverse needs of students, particularly those from CLD backgrounds and with disabilities.

In addition, teaching CLD students in an online environment requires mindfulness of home and community settings. While it is essential to build on students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and prior experiences to provide instruction that is reflective of who they are (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020), it is also critical to consider factors such as cultural and linguistic differences, stress, economic hardships, and anxiety and fear, especially during emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdi et al., 2020; Syeda & Dresens, 2020). Barko-Alva et al. (2020) urged educators to be responsive to what students and families from marginalized communities might be negotiating in their own circumstances. Jung (2020) encouraged educators to proactively reach out to the families of students with disabilities to assess their priorities and needs and to build upon resources available in their familial and community settings. As Kirkland (2020) mentioned, these resources can be technological, but may also be resources centered in human relationships and social communities, facilitating instruction that is personalized to learners' own contexts (Shearer et al., 2020).

## Current Study

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we adopted remote practicum in our special education practicum courses to respond to the urgent need of CLD students with disabilities and their families in the local community. Some pre-service teachers who had lost access to their practicum sites due to the abrupt school closures were willing to serve students and families in need through an alternative practicum opportunity. Although remote practicum is rare for university-based teacher preparation programs (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012), under the emergency guidance of the New York State Education Department, we sought to create remote teaching opportunities for these preservice teachers. The purpose of the remote instruction was to meet the need for individualized goals and instruction for students with disabilities, as face-to-face instruction was unavailable. As supervisors of the preservice teachers who engaged in this practicum, we investigated their experiences along with the those of the CLD students with disabilities and their families who partnered with the preservice teachers in family-partnered, individualized remote instruction.

Our investigation was anchored in the following research questions:

1. How do preservice teachers describe their experience of remote practicum in partnership with families of CLD students with disabilities during the COVID-19 school closures?
  - a. What instructional strategies did preservice teachers use to provide individualized remote instruction to students?
2. How do CLD students with disabilities and their families describe their experience of remote instruction provided by preservice teachers during the COVID-19 school closures?
3. What were the successes and challenges experienced by participants of the remote practicum family-partnership?

## Method

### COVID-19 and School Closures

The current study took place in Queens, New York, known as “the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world” (New York State, n.d.), where nearly 50% of residents are foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Among all the boroughs, Queens was hit the hardest by COVID-19 during the initial outbreak in March 2020 (NYC Health, n.d.). In response to the school closures and the resulting loss of practicum sites for many preservice teachers in our university’s program in special education teacher education, the program

partnered with a community organization that provides services to immigrant families of students with disabilities. The purpose of this collaboration was twofold: meet the needs of CLD families and their children with disabilities and provide alternative field experiences for preservice teachers. The community organization recruited parents, who signed up for individualized remote instruction, and the teacher education program offered preservice teachers an alternative opportunity to complete their practicum fieldwork hours.

### **Participants and Program Context**

Five preservice teacher candidates participated in this study. The preservice teachers were in their final semester of graduate school and were completing their special education practicum, which required 150 hours of field experience in a special education setting in Grades 1–6. All the participating preservice teachers were female. The community organization worked to recruit family members of children with disabilities. All participants who signed up after initial recruitment from the community organization were mothers of children with disabilities. In total, ten mothers signed up for individualized remote instruction. However, four families either did not respond to attempts to contact them or said that their schedule would not work with our preservice teachers' schedules. Four children were successfully matched to three preservice teachers through the community organization; one of the preservice teachers worked with two individual children. Two other preservice teachers were matched with two additional families through personal connections. Most of the children were from Asian immigrant families, and one student was from a Latino family. Four of the mothers were Korean and spoke primarily Korean; one was fluent in English. The Latina mother's primary language was English. All participating children were emergent bilinguals and had documented disabilities such as autism, deafness, cerebral palsy, speech–language impairment, and ADHD (see Table 1, next page). During the final eight weeks of the spring semester, the preservice teachers provided individualized remote instruction to their assigned student(s). Depending on their remaining required practicum hours, the preservice teachers spent from 25 to 75 hours in this alternative field experience.



Table 1. Participant Descriptions

Pre-service Teacher	Student, Gender, Disability, & Age	Family Ethnicity/ Race	Remote Learning Format	Interview Participation
Aaliyah	Bruno, male, autism, 14 years	Latina/ White	Synchronous work with student	Mother, student, and preservice teacher interviewed
Rachel	Daniel, male, autism, 10 years	Korean/ Asian	Synchronous work with behavior analyst and student	Mother and preservice teacher interviewed
Laura	Chul Soo, male, ADHD, 9 years	Korean/ Asian	Synchronous work with student	Mother, student, and preservice teacher interviewed
	Mi Young, female, deaf, 8 years	Mixed-race Asian	Synchronous work with student	Mother, student, and preservice teacher interviewed
Sarah	Kelly, female, learning disabilities/ cerebral palsy, 9 years	Korean/ Asian	Synchronous work with student	Mother and student interviewed
Kendis	Owen, male, autism, 10 years	Korean/ Asian	Synchronous work with student & mother (mother managed behavior & engaged in person)	Preservice teacher interviewed

*Notes.* All names throughout the article are pseudonyms. The family member who agreed to be interviewed in each case was the mother. Participating preservice teachers were all female.

## Practicum Structure

### *Practicum Field Experience*

Under the close supervision of practicum course instructors (the authors of this article), preservice teachers provided 30 minutes to 1 hour of individualized remote instruction to their students, two to five times a week for eight weeks, from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in early March until the end of their graduate school semester in mid-May. The preservice teachers also spent extra minutes communicating with the mothers before and



after each lesson via email or phone (calls and texts). Their primary language for communication was English, with some mothers noting that they relied on their children, translation applications, and/or other service providers for translation and communication.

### *Critical Reflection*

Preservice teachers engaged in self-reflection through biweekly journal writing. This offered them the opportunity to reflect on their practicum experiences, including their values and dispositions towards their multiply marginalized student(s) (Maude et al., 2009).

### *Teaching Demonstration and Observation*

Typically, preservice teachers' teaching demonstrations are observed by supervisors three times in a semester. However, due to COVID-19 and the switch to online coursework, observations of teaching demonstrations were canceled; thus, we did not observe any remote teaching demonstrations. Instead, we communicated closely with the preservice teachers as their course instructors and mentors by responding to questions in their biweekly journals and providing personalized feedback during individual virtual meetings.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), we provided the preservice teachers and families with written requests and the children with verbal assent requests to participate in the study. Out of ethical consideration, we assured them it was their choice to participate and that they could withdraw from the study at their discretion. We also explained that their privacy and identities would be protected in our research iterations. Once we received their consent and assent and after grades were entered for the practicum course when the semester was over, we followed the qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014) to collect data from the following sources: a semi-structured focus group interview with the preservice teachers, preservice teachers' biweekly journals, and individual interviews with students and their mothers. By including the voices of students with disabilities and their mothers in the preservice teachers' practicum experiences, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature on field-based practicum (Lawson et al., 2015).

All interviews with mothers, students, and the preservice teacher focus group were semi-structured. The interview with each mother consisted of questions about (1) why they engaged in remote instruction, (2) their first impressions and if the opportunity met their expectations, (3) educational gains and challenges their child experienced, (4) their role and communication with the preservice teachers, and (5) if they would participate in this type of

opportunity again and why. The student interview consisted of questions about (1) whether or not they enjoyed remote instruction and why, (2) if they learned anything through the experience or if they found participation difficult, and (3) if they would ever do it again and why. In the focus group with the preservice teachers, we asked questions about (1) their feelings and thoughts about the switch to remote instruction, (2) their first impressions of the family and student, (3) the types of communication they used to partner with the family, (4) how they got to know the student and the format and strategies used in remote instruction, (5) any memorable incidents and something they are proud of, and (6) challenges in remote instruction or what they would do differently.

The first author, who is bilingual in Korean and English, transcribed verbatim and translated the interviews that were conducted in Korean, which was the preferred language of three of the mothers (the mothers of Owen, Chul Soo, and Kelly). The second author and a graduate assistant transcribed verbatim the other two parent interviews, which were conducted in English according to the mothers' preferences. The recording of the focus group interview with the preservice teachers was sent to a transcription service.

The preservice teachers' biweekly journal entries were shared with their practicum instructor and generally addressed teaching activities, both positive and challenging, and plans for future instruction. They could write about anything else they felt was important that had occurred during that week. For example, when schools abruptly closed, many wrote about their feelings and concerns for their students with disabilities. Their final journal entry was a reflection on the entire practicum field experience.

For the data analysis, we individually read through the interview transcripts and journal entries to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, we engaged in both inductive and deductive thematic analysis to reduce the data and organize codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through an iterative process of reading and reflecting upon the collected data, we collapsed the codes into category labels while keeping the research questions in mind. After applying triangulation for coherence (Yin, 2014), we identified clusters of labels and combined them into three themes, presented below.

## **Findings**

We identified three themes in the individual and group interviews and journal entries: (1) initial response to abrupt school closures, (2) development of preservice teacher–family collaborative partnership, (3) successes and challenges of individualized remote instruction. The first theme offered a look at the urgent context created by the COVID-19 outbreak and the anxiety and needs

among the preservice teachers and the families of CLD students with disabilities. The second theme revealed how preservice teachers and mothers partnered with each other through the new practicum opportunity. The final theme illustrated the successes and challenges experienced by the preservice teachers, mothers, and students while navigating the remote individualized instruction.

### **Initial Responses to Abrupt School Closures**

In March 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak hit a peak in NYC, and all public schools transitioned to remote learning using Google Classroom. Preservice teachers in our university's practicum courses expressed panic and anxiety when they learned they would not have access to practicum sites due to the school closures. Some preservice teachers were not able to get in touch with their cooperating teachers, and those who were granted access to remote teaching did not feel it would give them the experience they would have had in the actual classroom. Aaliyah, who transitioned to Google Classroom once her placement moved to remote instruction, shared, "I kind of felt like I was there more of, like an observer, and I wasn't really doing anything hands-on within Google Classroom, so I wasn't really getting the experience I wanted or learning from it" (Aaliyah, Focus Group). Even for preservice teachers who had not lost their placement, the lack of teaching opportunity during remote instruction through Google Classroom was a concern.

Preservice teachers' concerns went beyond their own needs and extended to the students and their families. Aaliyah wrote, "I keep thinking about how remote learning will impact students with disabilities. I can't imagine how it must feel to be a parent of a child with a learning disability during this time" (Aaliyah, Journal). Sarah shared a similar sentiment in her journal: "I fear that students aren't getting the proper education that they need [through Google Classroom]...I fear that many students will fall behind" (Sarah, Journal). The families we interviewed concurred. Kelly's mother expressed, "I was afraid of the possible regression my daughter might have from not attending actual school...I even thought about going back to Korea with my daughter so she could receive proper education and services" (Parent Interview).

Some of the mothers were newcomer immigrants and mentioned feeling limited in supporting their children with schoolwork due to cultural and linguistic differences. Mi Young's mother stated, "If you are not proficient in English, it's hard to help with their homework. With my limited English it was really hard to support my children with remote learning" (Parent Interview). They also noticed that remote learning through Google Classroom lacked individualization, although their children desperately needed such attention from their teachers. Mi Young's mother expressed her frustration,

I feel like the DOE [Department of Education] had a plan for kids without disabilities. But, kids with disabilities require more support, but they didn't seem to have any plans for them. I don't think this [remote learning] is working....I wish the DOE had some training for parents on how to navigate remote learning. (Parent Interview)

Daniel's mother reported that the sudden switch to remote learning was confusing for her son who has autism: "At first, he was learning to be social, and then he had to suddenly learn to social distance" (Parent Interview). To help her child reach his goals for generalization of social skills, a novel person was needed. This could not have happened during his school's remote instruction alone, so collaboration with the preservice teacher, Rachel, provided a valuable opportunity. Daniel's mother explained,

That's what we were looking for that time, because getting away from school...he's unable to communicate with people, and if it's only family members, I think it's very limited. So, we were thinking that we were going to invite somebody to talk to him, and then Rachel, this [opportunity] came in that time...so when Rachel came into the picture [we could] generalize his skill, his social interaction skill. (Parent Interview)

### **Development of Preservice Teacher–Family Collaborative Partnership**

When family-partnered practicum became available, preservice teachers seemed comforted knowing they would support the community through their teaching as well as complete their required hours. Once the preservice teachers were matched with individual students and families through the community organization, they reached out to the families via email under the guidance of their practicum instructors. They seemed excited to engage in these partnerships and to help address some of the challenges students and families were facing. Rachel stated, "I feel like this is the least [I can do] for all those students who are struggling and can't receive adequate help from their parents" (Rachel, Focus Group). Laura wrote,

I want to hear their needs and understand how their son learns best. I hope to be able to help in any way that I can, and I look forward to starting something new. I have never virtually taught before, and so I am trying to prepare myself in whatever ways I can. (Laura, Journal)

Upon initial contact, many mothers reported they felt ready to begin instruction right away and expressed appreciation toward the preservice teachers for their willingness to support their children. Rachel communicated with Daniel's mother and worked directly with the behavior therapist to support

Daniel in his generalization of social skills. His mother noted the reciprocal nature of this partnership: “It’s something very different they give, it is like, in one hand, it helped Rachel to practice teaching. On the other hand, it put in more ideas for the therapists in the future. So, it’s like a win–win situation” (Parent Interview).

The mothers also mentioned that they really liked how the preservice teachers listened to their input and experience. Bruno’s mother stated,

I think she is going to be a marvelous teacher....She was a great listener to what a parent wanted. But also, she took my professional experience [as a parent], the advice from me, you know, and she was like, “Oh, wow, I never thought of something like that,” and it was really nice. (Parent Interview)

All preservice teachers shared that they were encouraged by the mothers’ enthusiasm and active involvement from the start. Kendis wrote in her journal,

I exchanged several emails back and forth with [my assigned student’s] mom in order to get a better idea of who Owen was and what his needs were, but also what were some things that she wanted me to work on with him specifically. (Kendis, Journal)

Drawing on their previous experiences, coursework, and knowledge on topics related to family partnerships and working with CLD families, the preservice teachers first positioned themselves as learners. They honored the students’ and their families’ funds of knowledge by listening carefully to what they brought to the partnership and the remote instruction setting. Having never met the assigned students and their families before, the preservice teachers asked as many questions as possible to learn about them and provide instruction appropriate to their individual needs.

During the interviews, the mothers repeatedly expressed satisfaction in how the preservice teachers asked about their children’s interests, support needs, areas to target, and progress. Highlighting the reciprocity of the partnerships, the preservice teachers also shared that the mothers were their cheerleaders. For some, this experience was their first time working with students with more profound disabilities, and they felt challenged but motivated to provide adequate instruction. For example, Kendis mentioned that Owen often had difficulty paying attention or displayed difficult behaviors such as running away from the screen or lying on the couch. However, according to Kendis, each session was delivered in collaboration with Owen’s mother: “His mom has been there each time for our sessions, which is good because he often wants to walk away and go do something else” (Kendis, Focus Group). The other preservice teachers agreed they often had to rely on the mothers, and building close relationships

with them ultimately resulted in a positive learning experience for the students. Kendis added, “[I] just want what’s best for the student, and the parent obviously knows their child best. I think that’s establishing a good level of respect and bond with the parent. [This] goes a long way” (Kendis, Focus Group).

### **Individualized Remote Instruction: Successes and Challenges**

The preservice teachers described both successes and challenges in delivering instruction remotely to individual students. They articulated that building relationships with students was essential to engaging them in instruction, particularly given the remote format. Rachel stated, “Once you’re able to connect with the kid...then he’s more relaxed and more open towards you” (Rachel, Focus Group). Aaliyah agreed: “We got friendly during the first session, and it was a good icebreaker...I think I humanized myself to him a little bit more, so it was great” (Aaliyah, Focus Group). Laura shared that she engaged her student by affirming his personal funds of knowledge:

Sometimes [he’d] say some things that, like just random thoughts on the topic that you can kind of tie in and bring in [his] own personal experience. Whenever [the] student would share like [his] thoughts or idea, I would always be like, “Oh, that’s really good,” and kind of relate it to the topic, so that really kept [him] wanting to add...and tie into the lesson. (Laura, Focus Group)

In a time of isolation, cultivating genuine relationships seemed to have offered the students and the preservice teachers a sense of connectedness that ultimately increased engagement in the instruction.

The students’ responses were mutual. In their interviews, all of the students mentioned their favorite part of the remote instruction was the personal attention they received. For instance, Chul Soo stated, “She [Laura] knows what I’m saying, so I tell her something, and she adds more” (Chul Soo, Individual Interview). When asked about his experience with remote learning and his favorite part of working with Aaliyah, Bruno stated, “When we’re reading all about sharks...I’ll just stick with Aaliyah...it’s fun” (Bruno, Individual Interview). Built around genuine relationships, the individualized instructional spaces allowed the preservice teachers to focus on students’ interests and build on their contributions.

The mothers also appreciated the individualized attention their children received and noticed they looked forward to the sessions with the preservice teachers. Daniel’s mother stated,

Rachel introduced a lot of new games for Daniel and according to what Daniel is interested in. So, every session, she’ll bring in something new

which is somehow related to what he likes. So, he's kind of looking forward to every session Rachel is here. (Parent Interview)

Similarly, Bruno's mother discussed the benefits of the individualized sessions not only to Bruno's learning but his overall development:

I think it was a good support for him with writing comprehension. I don't know, because I wasn't sitting there to see stuff like that light bulb moment...but for me, what I've seen that he's learned, it was more the independence, the social skills, all the stuff that she wasn't [directly] teaching. (Parent Interview)

However, there were also unforeseen challenges. Some preservice teachers found themselves lacking knowledge about their student's specific disability. Sarah's student, Kelly, had limited verbal abilities, and Sarah had to learn how to communicate with Kelly from her mother. Through trial and error and parent feedback, Sarah's instructional strategies solidified as their relationships grew. Kelly's mother described how she interacted with Sarah to support Kelly:

At first, Sarah didn't have any information about my daughter, like how she communicates and where she was academically. So, it was a process to get to know each other...Sarah asked me what she should do with Kelly, and I offered my suggestions. Sarah also sent some learning materials before her sessions, so I was able to share my thoughts with her that way. (Parent Interview)

Kelly's mother was initially worried about how the partnership would work out considering the remote format and her daughter's disabilities, which required more extensive support. However, she praised Sarah's willingness to listen to her advice, based on experience, to build on Kelly's strengths in interactive and multimodal learning.

Similarly, Rachel shared that she lacked experience working closely with students with autism and how that initially made her uncomfortable. However, her partnership with Daniel's mother allowed her to grow personally and professionally. She noted, "I feel like I'm personally more comfortable now... especially because he was autistic, I was more so worried about building that type of relationship with [him]" (Rachel, Focus Group). The individualized remote instruction settings provided a unique opportunity for the preservice teachers to work closely with students with low incidence disabilities who may have more extensive support needs. Despite the challenges, the preservice teachers relied upon collaboration with the families and student-centered relationships and ultimately broadened their ability to work with diverse learners.

The remote setting also challenged the preservice teachers to go beyond their comfort zone into new territories of teaching and learning. Aaliyah explained,



As someone who loves face-to-face instruction, hands-on learning is in my teaching philosophy, and this situation has forced me to step out of my comfort zone and work with what I have...understanding what it means to be prepared regardless of what may happen. Conducting my practicum at the same time as a pandemic has shown me that learning stops at nothing. (Aaliyah, Journal)

Partnering with students and families from marginalized communities opened the minds and hearts of the preservice teachers, allowing them to recognize not only the students' vulnerabilities and needs but also their resilience and passion for learning. Sarah summarized her experience in her final journal entry:

This pandemic has taught me a very important lesson. It has made me realize that students have other lives outside of school, and as teachers we might not always be aware of their struggles, well-being, and even success. This is something I will definitely be taking with me both in heart and in mind throughout my teaching career. (Sarah, Journal)

## Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a complex impact particularly on culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities and their families who had to make a sudden switch to remote instruction (Klass, 2020; Nadworny, 2020). According to the mothers interviewed in this study, their children required individualized attention and instruction from their teachers due to their disabilities; however, the emergent situation put such support on pause. Some mothers expressed a sense of loss and difficulty in helping their children navigate Google Classroom, utilized citywide, due to cultural and linguistic differences. Concurrently, changes to practicum field experiences because of COVID-19 made it possible for preservice teachers to obtain field hours by working with families directly (AACTE, 2020). In response to the needs of the students with disabilities and their families, we sought to investigate how preservice teachers whose school-based practicum was cut short were able to turn the crisis into an alternative practicum opportunity and deliver individualized remote instruction that is technology-based and relationship-centered to the students with disabilities and their families.

Through interviews with the mothers, students, and preservice teachers and analysis of the teachers' reflections, we inquired into their collaborative partnerships. Collaborating with families is an imperative skill for special education teachers; their responsibilities not only include conducting IEP meetings and developing IEPs with families but also becoming advocates for

families of children with disabilities and for their success in school (Goldman & Burke, 2019). However, learning how to practice authentic family partnerships and collaboration seems to be an experience often lacking in typical school-based practicum (Brownell et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2010), particularly with CLD families of children with disabilities (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Lo, 2008; Rossetti et al., 2017; Syeda & Dresens, 2020; Tucker et al., 2013). In our study, we found that relocating special education field-based practicum to family partnerships offered preservice teachers the unique opportunity to engage in parent collaboration through real-life application of instruction. For example, preservice teachers were able to implement strategies they had learned from previous courses, such as individualized instruction and differentiation in teaching according to students' and families' interests and educational, support, and cultural needs.

As Zeichner (2010) asserted, directly connecting with families within communities, beyond traditional school spaces, can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to learn from the knowledge and expertise of families. Previous research has also shown that working with families within their communities allows preservice teachers to learn strategies for communicating with and listening to families about their priorities and goals for their children (Accardo et al., 2020; Goldman & Burke, 2019; Zygmunt et al., 2018). In our study, the preservice teachers created lessons by relying on the mothers' input during remote instruction, acknowledging that parents were the experts on their children. For example, Sarah learned to communicate with her student, Kelly, from the mother, who took into consideration her daughter's unique, multimodal ways of communicating. When Kendis delivered her lessons, the student's mother offered instructional and behavioral support when he struggled with focusing and the new online learning format. Kirkland (2020) stated that people are the best resources when working with CLD families, even during remote learning. This proved true for the preservice teachers and the mothers, who became resources to each other by centering the students and through constant communication and collaboration despite challenges and cultural and language differences. By sharing their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and being open to possibility amid a time of crisis, the families and children in the current study gained a positive learning experience and authentic social connections.

Lastly, we found that the mothers were particularly grateful to have preservice teachers' assistance with their children, as a novel person for generalization, someone who taught new skills, and someone with whom their children enjoyed spending time. They also noted indirect benefits for their children, such as their learning to be more independent and development of social skills. Al-

though it was a short collaboration, all those involved in the concerted effort saw the value in each other and maximized the opportunity, using technology and human relationships as resources, to continue learning despite the unforeseen disruptions caused by the global pandemic.

### **Implications**

Grounded in the commitment to providing quality, accessible education for all children in the wake of a global crisis, this collaboration animated innovative, technology-based, relationship-centered ways to prepare preservice teachers to work with students with disabilities and their families who have historically and currently been marginalized in our school system. Digital and assistive technology tools offered the preservice teachers and their students and families a way to conduct flexible, responsive online education that ultimately enhanced their understanding of each other (Anderson & Putman, 2020; Martínez-Álvarez et al., 2018). As the pandemic continues to impact society, teacher educators must reimagine teacher education and field experiences to enable preservice teachers to work collaboratively with families and students from marginalized communities and intentionally build social justice skills. Opportunities such as the family partnerships demonstrated in this study can allow preservice teachers to grow as educators who honor parents as experts, a perception parents often say is lacking in their relationship with schools in special education (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014).

We also highlight the benefits of building partnerships between university-based teacher education programs and community organizations to provide educational services through preservice teacher fieldwork. The community organization with whom we partnered surveyed the needs of families in the community during the COVID-19 outbreak and offered them access to individualized remote instruction. Their efforts made the family partnerships possible and allowed the preservice teachers to engage in learning experiences beyond the typical school-based ones. Although the partnerships were in response to an emergency situation, the experiences gained offer a unique opportunity to reimagine field-based practicum through community partnerships, which can continue postpandemic in a variety of teacher education contexts.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The current study was exploratory in nature and was conducted promptly after the abrupt educational changes caused by COVID-19. Therefore, it is limited in length and in the amount and type of data collected. Future research should further study the impact of COVID-19 on community and family

partnerships immediately after and beyond the pandemic, as well as the sustainability of such partnerships. In addition, future research should investigate the benefits and challenges of community field-based practicum for preservice teachers within special education teacher education. More in-depth studies on the perspectives of parents and students with disabilities on the partnerships are also needed. Lastly, it is vital to examine if community-based practicum with students with disabilities leads to improved preservice teacher collaboration skills and student learning outcomes after they enter the teaching field.

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