Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Spanish Speaking Families who have Children with Disabilities

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The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has caused many changes in the daily lives, and the physical, and psychological well-being of many individuals. This unexpected event has reshaped the traditional ways in how individuals access their education, perform their jobs as well as how they are able to socialize and interact with their loved ones (Marzilli et al., 2021). As the COVID-19 pandemic has caused challenges for many, it is important to examine how it has impacted families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds and their children with special needs. Not only is there limited research in the area of CLD families and the hurdles they must overcome to access resources and opportunities for their children in special education (Buren et al., 2020), there is also limited research about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted CLD families and services for their children.

Rivera-Figueroa et al. (2022) indicated that many CLD families struggle to get diagnoses or evaluations completed for their children with disabilities given the limited amount of knowledge they have. Furthermore, the study by Angell and Soloman (2017) reported that families coming from CLD backgrounds end up having to fight more with educational institutions to be able to collaborate and engage when decisions are made to ensure that they are made in the best interest of their children. Research by Kurvet-Käosaar (2021), Marzilli et al. (2021) and Sheen et al. (2021) have examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the social, emotional and psychological well-beings of children, parents and family members across the world. As scholars continue to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted lives across the globe, it is important to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CLD families to allow educational stakeholders to ensure that they are well prepared to continue to support the families. Educational stakeholders may help CLD families overcome the barriers that prevent them from effectively advocating for their children as well as ensuring that their children benefit from the best educational programs and resources possible. The purpose of this study was to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Spanish speaking families of students with special needs during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Historically, families from CLD backgrounds have encountered barriers that impact their ability to effectively advocate for their rights and those of their children.

Barriers such as disempowerment, language, accessibility, and feelings of inferiority have prevented the overall ability for CLD families to effectively advocate and collaborate within the educational decisions made for their children (Burke & Goldman, 2018; Goss, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, a worldwide unexpected event, has impacted the lives of many individuals around the world including students with and without disabilities and their families (Feinberg et al., 2021; Neece et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, CLD families encounter many barriers to their children's education and their advocacy for their children; the COVID-19 pandemic has created even more challenges for these families.

Experiences of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families Navigating the Special Education System

CLD Family Engagement Barriers

Goss (2017) studied the reasoning behind parents' resistance to be involved and advocate in their children's education. The researcher interviewed individuals working with families who came from CLD backgrounds and identified three themes: (1) feeling unwanted, (2) keeping you in the dark, and (3) a culture of bullying and fear. Goss interviewed eight members of the parent empowerment program in Dunham County and recorded the perceptions of the families by completing interviews in a structured approach while the participants and the researchers engaged in natural conversations. Goss also found that some parents were charged with trespassing while others reported bullying as a result of their efforts to advocate for their children.

Rossetti et al. (2020) examined the perceptions of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Haitian families about their participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and found some barriers that prevented them from being able to advocate for their children. Out of the 38 participants in this study, 33 of the participants were mothers whose English proficiency was limited. To gather the information from the parents, the researchers interviewed the families while they participated in focused groups. Participants shared that educational agencies needed to improve the collaboration between the school personnel and the families to allow them to provide input during the meetings. Some barriers for families to effectively engage and collaborate with educational teams were having limited access to information, which also prevented them from being able to advocate for their children (Rossetti et al., 2020). Additionally, they found that the lack of educator accountability prevented families from being encouraged to share and participate during IEP meetings.

Burke and Goldman (2018) examined barriers that prevented families from advocating for their children with disabilities by interviewing advocates working with CLD families. They identified disempowerment (perceptions), service delivery from schools, and language as the barriers impacting parents' advocacy for their children with disabilities. Pearson et al. (2019) argue that CLD families need additional support when understanding the IEP process, their rights and those of their children. Educational teams have a duty to ensure that parents understand their rights and to answer any questions that parents have to understand their rights and those of their children.

Mueller et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of supporting CLD families

through the educational decision-making processes of their children. Mueller et al. (2009) interviewed eight mothers who participated in parent-to-parent support groups and found that participants felt supported when they had the opportunity to share with other parents. The researchers found three major advantages from parent support groups: (1) mothers felt that participating in support groups provided them with the opportunity to feel like they were part of a family, (2) having a "source of information", and (3) emotional support gained by participating and being part of these meetings. This study further supported the idea that providing families with the opportunity to engage and collaborate with other families, allows them to be more prepared when trying to advocate for their children as well as allows them with the opportunity to be able to understand educational processes. The mothers in this study felt that they had support available to them by feeling comfortable to share with other parents.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Families

Feinberg et al. (2021) examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted families, their overall mental health, their well-being, and family relationships. By using families that had been part of a prevention trial years before the pandemic started, the researchers examined if there was a difference within the data they collected for the families in terms of parent depression, externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Feinberg et al. (2021) found that there was a large difference during the pandemic compared to the data that they had previously gathered for the families. They used paired t tests and hierarchical linear modeling to analyze their data to find the differences between the two situations, before and during the pandemic. Results of

this study showed that the COVID-19 pandemic caused families' mental health conditions to worsen. The researchers found that there were higher levels of depression overall for families as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, the results showed that mothers' levels of mental health conditions and symptoms were higher when compared to fathers' levels of depression.

Additionally, Ivbijaro et al. (2020) conducted a study to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' well-being. The researchers asked participants to share about the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought upon them as well as how they dealt with the pandemic and the changes they would like to see in the future given a similar situation. The researchers asked the participants to answer the questions by including narrative responses as well as by asking them to send photos and images. Results of this study showed that about 90% of the participants who responded to their questions, shared that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted them negatively. The authors specifically found that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted individuals' mental well-being as their levels of anxiety and stress increased. For individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, the pandemic inflicted fear amongst them as they worried about relapsing given the burden that COVID-19 caused for them.

Gazmararian et al. (2021) studied the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on high school students in a semi-rural high school in Georgia. Participants in the study were asked to complete a one-time online survey. The researchers found that about one fourth of the participants expressed that they were "extremely or very worried about the pandemic" (pg. 358). The authors reported that there were higher ratings in

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students reporting mental health difficulties within the racial/ethnic minoritized groups as well as within the lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, they reported that females had higher ratings for stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Impact of COVID-19 on Individuals with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Acts (IDEA) outlines that individuals with disabilities have a right to a free appropriate public education (Section 300.101, n.d.). This means providing the students with the support and services that their needs require. The COVID-19 pandemic has created many unexpected changes to the overall service delivery within educational settings. During the school closures that took place at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, there was an interruption in special education support and services given that many, if not all educational agencies, were not prepared to service students away from the traditional educational setting (Agoratus, 2020; Fredman, 2021). For many educational stakeholders as well as families, the COVID-19 pandemic created many hurdles that they had to overcome to be able to continue providing the students with the best opportunities possible. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only impacted educational service delivery for students and educational staff, it has also negatively impacted students' academic growth (Aurini, 2021; Commodari & La Rosa, 2021) as well as has resulted in causing psychological and financial distress to many individuals (Gazmararian et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2021; Ivbijaro et al., 2020).

Embregts et al. (2021) examined the experiences of five mothers who have children with intellectual disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three emerging themes came out during the interviews with the mothers. Theme one addressed the importance of staying healthy and how the COVID-19 pandemic was a factor that may have impacted the opportunity for families to ensure that their children were healthy and safe. One of the participating mothers shared that her child was in intensive care a couple of times prior to COVID-19 and they feared that this virus would cause health issues and difficulties for her son. The participants shared that COVID-19 was a consistent health threat for their families and their children. As a result of this, the families prevented exposing their children to community activities and individuals, to keep them safe. The second theme identified included making their situations work for their own well-being and that of their children. They added that they looked for additional activities to provide their children with when they were home taking care of them to ensure that they continued learning. One of the parents shared that she took extra measures to make sure her daughter had a good day. The third theme included the family's perception of their living situations and those of their children. They reported that they were in an environment that provided them with more "calmness" as they stayed home and did not participate in community activities. As a result, the families reported that they did not have to meet social expectations as well as were able to escape from different undesired activities.

Neece et al. (2020) examined the experiences of predominantly Hispanic/Latinx Spanish speaking families and their experiences during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers examined the perceptions and experiences of 77 parents of children ages three to five years old with developmental

delays and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in California and Oregon. The researchers found that participants experienced some positive outcomes and negative challenges as a result of COVID-19. About 47% of the participants shared that it was difficult being home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second most challenging experience for the participants was balancing work and taking care of their children. For many families, the COVID-19 pandemic forced family members to have to stay home to support their children due to child care and educational needs. Additionally, parents shared that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the services that their children were receiving within their educational settings. The COVID-19 pandemic caused an interruption in services for their children, which caused many of their children to show regression within the learned skills. Some of their worries were that they did not know how to help their children continue learning and making progress. Despite the identified challenges for many of the families, Neece et al. (2020) also found that families had positive experiences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families shared that COVID-19 caused them to be able to spend more time at home with their children, which in turn resulted in improving the relationships they had with their children. Lastly, families shared that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in long-term effects for economic finances for many of them.

The purpose of this study was to learn about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities in a western state of the United States. To study the experiences of the participating families, the researchers proposed to answer the following questions:

[How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Spanish speaking families of students with disabilities? How did the educational services change for Spanish speaking families' students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?]

Using a qualitative approach, this study allowed the researchers to begin understanding the emerging research topic of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals, in this case, Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities.

Method

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend the use of a phenomenological study when trying to make meaning from the experiences of the participants as well as to develop themes from the data gathered. For this research study, the researchers used a phenomenological approach and conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews to examine the experiences of Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using open-ended questions allowed the researchers to understand the participants' experiences to construct meaning and develop themes based on their experiences.

Setting

This study included families that participate in a non-profit organization in a western state of the United States. This non-profit organization supports Spanish speaking families of students with disabilities to access resources within their community to support them and their children. This organization also provides families with in person and online support groups as well as opportunities to learn about different topics and legal matters. The interviews were

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completed using Zoom©, an online video-audio tool.

Participants

The researchers in this study used a convenience sampling to recruit the participants. Convenience sampling allowed the researchers to understand the experiences of smaller groups of participants when trying to generalize the experiences of other families from the larger population (Rumrill et al., 2020). The researchers recruited participants over the age of 18 from the non-profit organization. The director of the organization sent out the recruitment letter by email and WhatsApp, a free software that allows instant text and audio messaging, audio, and video calls. Using Whatsapp has proven to be an effective way to recruit families for research participation (Chenane & Hammond, 2021; Raynal & Light, 2021). If participants were interested to participate, they emailed or phone called the researchers and the researchers then contacted them to set up a time for the interview. The families in this study included nine mothers and one father of children with disabilities which included intellectual disabilities (ID), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and other health impairments (OHI). Participants' ages ranged from 33-47 years old and self-identified as Hispanic. All the participants in this study were caregivers and parents of at least one child with a disability. Participants were given pseudonyms. Table 1 shows the demographic data for the participants in the study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education Level	Number of Children with Disability	Number of Children Without Disability	Disability
Dolores	Female	36	Hispanic	High School	2	1	Autism
Emma	Female	38	Hispanic	Some College	2	1	OHI
Carla	Female	47	Hispanic	Some College	2	1	Autism
Sandra	Female	39	Hispanic	High School	3	1	Autism
Marta	Female	39	Hispanic	Middle School	1	1	ID
Susana	Female	46	Hispanic	GED	4	1	ID
Mayra	Female	33	Hispanic	College Graduate	1	1	Autism
Juan	Male	42	Hispanic	Middle School	2	1	OHI
Lisa	Female	34	Hispanic	High School	3	1	Autism
Nancy	Female	34	Hispanic	Middle School	2	2	Autism

Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the

University. After arranging an interview appointment with the participant, the first author interviewed each participant using an open-ended interview protocol. The interview questions were developed after a review of the literature by both authors. The participants were interviewed once, and the interviews lasted no longer than 20 minutes. The interview consisted of seven open-ended questions and was followed by questions about the participant's demographics. During the interviews, the researcher took field notes as the participants shared their experiences, this allowed the researcher to begin identifying possible codes that emerged from the interviews. After each interview was concluded, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interview. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to any identifying information that the participants shared. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher sent the interview transcripts to the participants to ensure that what the participants shared was an accurate representation of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. All data such as audio recordings, interview transcripts, and coded data were stored in a password protected electronic folder. Only members of the research team had access to this information.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness within this research study, the researchers embedded the following components of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, the researchers included member checks within this research study. The member checks allowed the researchers to return the interview transcripts to the participants to ensure

that the information gathered from the interviews was an accurate representation of their experiences. The researchers triangulated the data by including themes and codes of the interviews and making comparisons to each other's understanding of what was shared by comparing field notes and interpretations (Rumrill et al., 2020). One researcher completed all the interviews to ensure that the process of interviewing was identical to allow for replication and dependability. To ensure dependability, the researchers communicated biweekly and kept notes about the research process. To ensure transferability of the data, the researchers used open-ended questions to allow the participants to share what they felt, thought or experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This would allow others to be able to interpret these data to make sense of the families' experience to be able to potentially generalize the data across other populations of similar demographics. To ensure confirmability within the study, the researchers engaged in biweekly communication and member checks to discuss the findings from the interviews to ensure that they were an accurate representation of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected within this study, the researchers used a thematic analysis approach, which allowed the researchers to be able to validate the accuracy of the data gathered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers transcribed the audio recorded data gathered from the interviews while using REV, a transcription software that transcribes Spanish audio to text. After sending the participants the transcripts to

verify for accuracy, the researchers read and looked at the interview transcript three times. While reviewing the interview transcripts, data gathered from the transcripts, were coded and organized by chunks and notes were taken on words that represented the information within the transcript. Next, the researchers gathered the information from step three and generated categories and themes. The researchers also compared their findings with the field notes taken during the interviews to look for similarities. The researchers met and discussed the emerging themes to verify that both researchers agreed on the information and the meaning. Following these steps provided the researchers with the opportunity to identify codes and themes that were representative of the participants' actual experiences and not representations of what the researchers perceived their experiences to be.

Results/Findings

Findings for this study identified four major themes: (1) new learning opportunities; (2) educational impact and performance; (3) decline of socio-emotional well-being; and (4) impact on home stability.

New Learning Opportunities

The first theme New Learning Opportunities included that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals continued to find ways to learn. This theme included three sub-themes: (1) discovery that technology can be used in many ways; (2) increased the use of spiritual/religious beliefs; and (3) coping skills.

Discovery that technology can be used in many ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided learning and communication opportunities to families and children and the discovery that technology can be used in many different ways. More than half of the participants in this study expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in innovation and learning. Carla expressed that they were able to continue learning virtually and shared the following: "Tomamos cursos desde México para acá de... diferentes, de repostería, de panadería" *[We took courses from Mexico to here for different things, from confectionery to bakery]*. Additionally, Susana shared that she took classes to empower herself to help her daughter during the pandemic. "Hice un curso de cómo ayudar a los niños que tienen educación especial. Traté de buscar osea busque muchos recursos que tanto como la ayudaron a ella, me ayudaron a mí como mamá a entenderla" *[I took a course on how to help children with special education. I tried to search, I mean, I searched for many resources that, as much as they helped her, helped me as a mother to understand her].*

The COVID-19 pandemic also allowed participants to witness the learning of their children while they used the virtual format. Having their children access their education while attending Zoom meetings allowed families to observe their children interact with their teachers and other professionals. Some parents shared that it was beneficial to observe speech and language and occupational therapist sessions while working with their children. Mayra stated the following:

> Todas las sesiones por videollamada nos sirvió que la terapeuta me instruía a mí en cómo en cómo hablarle a Luna como... animarla al

decir palabras o como hacerle las repeticiones…Eso a mí me ayudó en lo personal mucho. Me hizo ver a mi hija desde otro lado. *[All sessions were by video call, it helped us that the therapist instructed me on how to talk to Luna and how to encourage her when saying words or how to do the repetitions. That helped me a lot personally. This made me see my daughter from another side].*

Having therapy sessions over Zoom allowed the families to learn about strategies used within these sessions to practice at home with their children to allow them to continue making growth in different areas. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic provided participants with opportunities to strengthen their families' relationships. These invaluable opportunities resulted in strengthening family bonds as well as getting to know each other more. Most participants shared that the COVID-19 pandemic provided extra time to spend with family as well as with their children.

Furthermore, being able to have better understanding and communication between family members was an important outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Marta reported the following:

Pues lo que siento yo, que hubo más comunicación yo con mi niño, que tiene 15 años. Todo el tiempo estábamos como… que no poníamos de acuerdo, no salíamos de acuerdo porque él como que sí discutíamos un poco más y con la pandemia como que nos conocimos más oiga. O sea, no es cosa que no nos conocíamos, sino que como le dire

el revivir a diario en la casa al estarlo yo apoyando en lo que el ocupaba para sus clases. *[Well, what I feel is that there was more communication between me and my son, who is 15 years old. All the time we were like, in other words, we didn't agree, we didn't agree because, we argued a little more and with the pandemic we kind of got to know each other better. In other words, it is not that we did not know each other, but as I tell you, reliving daily at home as I was supporting him in what he used for his classes].*

Increased use of spiritual/religious beliefs.

The second sub-theme that emerged from this study was the increased use of spiritual/religious beliefs and coping strategies. For many families, faith and hope were something that allowed them to continue pushing through the many obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many families shared that they relied heavily on their religious beliefs and prayer. Susana shared:

Entonces yo… le doy gracias a Dios pues que a pesar de todo lo malo que vimos de COVID, pues a mí me me puso como el sentir de y la motivación de estar buscando cosas nuevas para ayudarla a ella, ayudarme a mí y más adelante ayudar a otros niños más que yo pueda ayudar de padres latinos" *[So I… thank God because despite all the bad things we saw from COVID, it gave me the feeling of and the motivation to be looking for new things to help her, help me and more*

to go ahead and help other children that I can help of Latino parents].

Additionally, Lisa shared:

Ah, yo de la manera que… yo me pude mantener bien mentalmente, psicológicamente, con mi esposo, con mis hijos, fue por medio de la oración, por medio de mi comunicación con Dios. Yo pienso que nadie tenemos el control en este mundo, solamente Dios lo tiene. Y… así fue como yo pienso que teniendo a Dios te ayuda a hacer, a ser un… poco mejor, a mantenerte bien, a un poco más estable" *[Ah, the way that I was able to keep myself in good shape mentally, psychologically, with my husband, with my children, was through prayer, through my communication with God. I think that no one is in control in this world, only God is. And that's how I think that having God helps you to do, to be a little better, to stay well, a little more stable].*

Coping strategies.

Some mothers reported that seeking therapy and utilizing coping strategies such as having positive mentalities supported keeping themselves togethers. Sandra reported: "me funcionó mucho fue tener calma, pensar positivamente como solucionar… el problema, pensar con la cabeza fría de cómo sacar todo esto adelante y creo que fue lo que más me funcionó''. *[What worked for me a lot was being calm, thinking positively about how to solve the problem, thinking with a cool head about how to get all of this forward, and I*

think that was what worked the most for me].

Educational Impact and Performance

Theme two included how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational performance of students with disabilities. Three sub-themes emerged: (1) online classes and therapies; (2) loss or delay of services; and (3) learning loss and regression.

Online classes/therapies.

Education transitioned to virtual learning which in turn forced most educational agencies to provide instruction and services online. This transition caused many families to feel disempowered as many of the families did not have knowledge about the use of technology or how to help their children access their education virtually. All the participants in this study reported that learning online was very difficult and that their children did not fully participate or engage. Susana shared that she had to wear many hats as she tried to support her daughter 's learning during virtual instruction.

Más que nada cuando tienen niños con educación especial, uno tiene que ser como mamá, maestra, psicóloga, todo con ellos, porque no, ellos no, pues realmente necesitan mucha ayuda y siento que al estar haciendo la escuela en casa ellos no podían, no podían solos. *[More than anything when one has children with special education, one has to be like a mother, a teacher, a psychologist, everything with them, because no, they don't, because they really need a lot of help and I feel that by doing school at home they couldn't, they couldn't alone].*

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One mother specifically reported that her son thought of Zoom sessions as a "joke" more than educational. Two families shared that they had to be the "one on one" support for their children to ensure that they stayed in their seat to learn. Susana reported that she was unable to take care of her house chores and daily self-care needs, like eating, because she had to sit with her child while she attempted to participate. "Porque no sabía a veces de qué le estaba hablando la maestra. La maestra no ponía mucho énfasis en ella porque pues ella casi no participaba" *[Sometimes she didn't know what the teacher was talking about. The teacher did not put much emphasis on her because she hardly participated].*

Loss or delay of services.

Many families and children lost their educational and therapeutic services due to agency closures. Some agencies completely closed their services while others prolonged their appointment days and times until state and federal guidance allowed their reopening. Five families shared that their children lost their school and in-home therapy services. Two other families shared that although their children were provided with the support virtually, they refused to participate and that therapy sessions were not beneficial as they did not help their children. Another mother reported how long it took to get appointments for her daughter as well as to get the support she needed to help her communication needs and shared the following: "Empezamos el proceso un año antes, suele estar todo un año para que pudiéramos ver a la psicóloga y tener el diagnóstico. Los servicios han sido muy, muy lentos" *[We started the process a year before, it almost took a whole year for us to see the psychologist and have the diagnosis. Services have been very very*

slow]. For other families, technology issues and not having internet or computers, prevented their children from accessing their education and services. Nancy reported they had, "dificultad para conectarnos, porque al principio no teníamos Internet. No estábamos en la computadora porque no… él no toleraba ni cinco minutos en la computadora" *[difficulty connecting, because at first we didn't have Internet. We were not on the computer because no… he did not tolerate even five minutes on the computer].*

Learning loss and regression.

In this study, participants shared that before the pandemic, special education support and services were not great and only worsened because of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a delay and loss of services which resulted in children losing the learned skills they had and prevented them from making growth in any other area. Lisa shared the following:

> Se atrasaron en el nivel académico. También… en su comportamiento yo se lo noté mucho, mucho, mucho, como le cambió su comportamiento a él. No era el mismo comportamiento que él tenía cuando está yendo a la escuela, cuando está recibiendo instrucciones por parte de un instructor, o que está haciendo actividades, que está haciendo trabajo, que le están enseñando y él está aprendiendo no es, no es igual. *[They fell behind in the academic level. I also noticed in his behavior a lot, a lot, a lot, how his behavior changed. It was not the same behavior he had when he was going to school, when he was receiving instructions from an instructor, or*

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when he is doing activities, doing work, that they are teaching him and he is learning, it is not, it is not the same].

For some families, daily routines became non-existent, while others struggled to get their children back into their daily habits. Emma shared "Desde ese entonces ha sido para ella muy difícil y ahora es el conciliar el sueño. Ahora ha cambiado, duerme muy poquito y yo pienso que ella está muy cansada precisamente de cómo cambió todo su horario" *[Since then, it has been very difficult for her and now it is about falling asleep. Now it has changed, she sleeps very little and I think she is very tired precisely because of how her whole schedule has changed].*

Decline of Socio-Emotional Well-being

Theme three included how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the overall mental health status of many families and their children. This theme included two sub-themes which focus on the increase of mental health needs as well as isolation feelings.

Increase in mental health needs.

Given the many challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the social, emotional, and psychological stability of many families shifted. One of the mothers specifically stated that COVID-19 left "secuelas" *[aftermath]* from physical to psychological illnesses. The majority of participants reported that the pandemic caused them to feel frustrated. Five participants shared that the COVID-19 pandemic also caused much stress in their daily lives. Juan reported that his son 's frustration due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused for him to communicate with the school that he was intending to commit suicide. "Se frustró al grado de que llamó a

la escuela para decir que a veces sentía ganas de suicidarse" *[He got so frustrated that he called the school to say he sometimes felt like committing suicide].* Emma reported that the family's physical distress from having COVID-19 caused her daughter to experience high levels of anxiety. "Lo que más desató su ansiedad era…que le daban crisis de ansiedad durante ese tiempo, cuando nosotros duramos dos meses enfermos porque se contagió uno, después otro, después yo, después mi otra hija" *[What triggered her anxiety the most and that gave her anxiety crises during that time, was when we lasted two months sick because one was infected, then another, then me, then my other daughter].*

Isolation.

Other families reported that their children experienced frustration and anxiety not being able to socialize and play with others due to having to quarantine at home. Lisa shared "era muy frustrante estar aquí adentro de la casa y no poder… regresar a la escuela y interactuar con los amiguitos" *[It was very frustrating to be here inside the house and not being… able to go back to school and interact with friends].*

Impact on Home Stability

The last theme identified was Impact of Home Stability. This theme includes two sub-themes which included financial distress/hardship and limitation of resources for families.

Financial distress/hardship.

Some families' finances were negatively impacted as a result of the pandemic. Four of the participants lost their jobs completely, while for three participants their job hours decreased causing a financial distress on the family, and one participant lost her home due to failing to

pay her rent. Additionally, this mother had to choose between working to provide for her family and staying home to support her child with virtual instruction. Sandra shared that it was difficult for her and expressed the following:

> Porqué pues trabajo, soy madre soltera y no tenía tiempo de meterme con el a... la escuela por... la computadora y me iban a mandar a corte. Entonces, desafortunadamente, pues yo les dije que... estaba bien porque yo no podía dejar de trabajar por estar con ellos en la escuela, verdad? A lo mejor no sé si estuve mal, pero yo también tenía que aportar economía a mi casa. *[Because I work, I'm a single mother and I didn't have time to go to school with him on the computer and they were going to send me to court. So, unfortunately, well, I told them that it was okay because I couldn't stop working to be with them at school, right? I don't know if I was wrong, but I also had to contribute financially].*

Limitation of resources for the families.

There was a limited amount of support offered to the families that participated in this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many families did not get financial support like those of stimulus checks due to their immigration status. Other families had very limited information about COVID-19 as well as about support and services available to their community during these difficult times. Emma shared: "información que se... dio muy poca información en su momento. Bueno, pero yo también entiendo que por los doctores, ni incluso los doctores

tampoco no lo sabían al principio...fue algo así muy muy difícil" *[Information that I know very little information was given at the time. Well, but I also understand that for the doctors, not even the doctors knew at the beginning...it was something that was very very difficult].* Additionally, Mayra included that health care has always been problematic and that during the COVID-19 pandemic Hispanic communities had limited resources available to them when ill. She shared the following*:*

> Pues sigo creyendo que...los servicios de salud ya eran un problema antes de la pandemia. Ahora es obvio que no todos tenemos acceso a la salud. Y ojalá, ojalá hubiera forma de mejorar ese aspecto en la vida de todos. No nada más de los que tienen recursos. *[Well, I still believe that health services were already a problem before the pandemic. Now it is obvious that not all of us have access to healthcare. And I wish, I wish there was a way to improve that aspect of everyone's life. Not just for those who have resources].*

Discussion

Through the use of a phenomenological design, the researchers aimed to understand the experiences of Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. By interviewing nine mothers and one father, the researchers found that the COVID-19 pandemic caused families to face some positive and negative outcomes and experiences. Families shared that the COVID-19 crisis has provided them with new learning opportunities. They gained the opportunity to observe their

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children as they learned as well as some families reported that they were able to learn by completing online workshops. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for the participants and caused educational, psychological, emotional, and financial hardships.

These findings are similar to those of previous research that examined the psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and children (Feingberg et al., 2021; Gazmararian et al., 2021; Ivbijaro et al., 2020; Neece et al., 2020). Similar to Neece et al. (2020), the findings of this study show the ways that families used their faith and religious beliefs to cope with the challenges that the pandemic caused. Furthermore, these findings also show that families' levels of anxiety, stress and frustration increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is also supported by recent research (Feingberg et al., 2021; Gazmararian et al., 2021; Ivbijaro et al., 2020). Additionally, like Neece et al. (2020), this study found that many children lost access to educational and therapeutic services during the pandemic, which led to learning loss and regression for most students with disabilities.

Findings from this study may support educational stakeholders to examine some of the challenges that the families faced to allow them to prepare to help meet the needs that the COVID-19 pandemic caused for the families and their children. Educational staff may offer compensatory services to students who missed most of their instruction due to the fact that they did not engage or connect during virtual learning. Additionally, they may offer families and students referrals to resources and or mental health agencies to support psychological, emotional and social well-being. Lastly, educational stakeholders may provide families with workshops or lectures on the use of technology to empower them and allow them to learn how to help their children learn through electronic platforms, should any situation like that of the COVID-19 pandemic were to happen again.

Limitations

Given that the researchers only included Spanish speaking families from a western state non-profit organization, the sample size was limited. Future studies should include more families from different states to include a larger sample to help with generalizability of the results. Additionally, email was used to communicate with families and the interviews took place remotely via Zoom. Many families may not have had access to email and/or the Zoom platform, which may have prevented some families from participating given these requirements. Given that the interviews were conducted over Zoom; this could have impacted the level of comfort that the families felt when sharing their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps conducting the interviews in person would have allowed for families to share more with the researchers. Furthermore, while conducting the interviews, the researchers may include asking follow up questions after responses to questions and asking interpreting questions to help with understanding the meaning. Lastly, the data was collected a year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the perspectives that were captured in this study may have differed had the data been collected at the beginning rather than a year after the pandemic started. Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable perspectives on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic

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had on Spanish speaking families of children with disabilities.

Implications for Future Practice

The results from this study can inform how schools can better respond to the needs of Spanish speaking parents and their children with special needs. Results from this study can create a gateway for schools to create partnerships with families that come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, in this case Spanish speaking families. Future researchers should continue to examine the factors that impact the access families have to educational resources and opportunities for their children with special needs.

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