

## **Special Educators' Experiences in the Pivot from In-Person to Virtual Teaching During COVID-19: A Phenomenological Study**

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of special educators in the pivot from in-person to virtual learning during COVID-19. A national sample of 46 participants participated in the study. Individual recorded interviews were conducted with each participant by the primary researcher. Two optional focus groups were conducted by the research team. Data analysis included coding, cross coding, triangulation, and member checking as a means of understanding the essence of participant experience within the larger educational system. Study findings may be used to inform researchers and those interested in the social sciences of the challenges found within special education, the unique strengths that special educators bring to education, and how we might better support special education teachers.

*Keywords: Assistive Technology (AT), Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), COVID-19, Special Education, Special Needs, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)*

## INTRODUCTION

The onset of COVID-19 brought about dramatic changes in social processes around the globe. Educational systems were particularly hard hit, as schools across the U.S. moved to virtual instruction and learning. Educators faced challenges of digital access, digital equality, uniform procedures, and efforts to reach families and students. One of the greatest challenges was providing virtual services for students with special needs. Special education (SpEd) teachers, speech language pathologists (SLP), assistive technology coaches (AT), occupational therapists (OT), physical therapists (PT), and para-professionals were tasked with finding ways to provide equitable education systems for students with disabilities. Please note: Education is an acronym-rich discipline. As such, we have provided a list of common acronyms in Appendix A.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

COVID-19 is a highly contagious respiratory virus. Health organizations advised that social life be restricted, primarily through isolation, in an attempt to stop the spread. According to UNESCO (2020), 22 countries closed schools at all levels impacting more than 90% of students worldwide. The rapidity of school closures left teachers, especially special education teachers, in a lurch as they tried to accommodate the needs of students. School systems around the world switched to online delivery with varying degrees of success (Alshamri, 2021).

Worldwide, more than 300 million cases were reported with more than 5 million deaths (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). While the virus had a significant impact on the healthcare community and global economy, it also shut down many social services, including education. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a state of public emergency in January 2020, with declaration of a global pandemic shortly thereafter (DeMartino, 2021). In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued guidance regarding ways schools should handle COVID-19 on March 12, 2020. Within 10 days, 48 states issued orders to close public schools; the final two states closed schools on April 1 and April 2, 2020 (Marshall, et al., 2020). The pandemic was significant in the sheer size of the population affected and unprecedented measures taken to contain its spread (Sakarneh, 2021).

### Emergency Remote Teaching

Early in the pandemic, teachers and students were faced with much uncertainty. Questions arose such as: How long would schools be closed? How would students receive learning materials? What challenges would be encountered by teachers and students?

Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is defined as a temporary shift in delivery of instruction due to a crisis situation (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Fournier, et al., 2020; Marshall, et al., 2020; Schuck & Lambert, 2020; Toquero, 2020). It is different from planned online instruction, which is generally optional, well-planned, and features teachers who are already familiar with online pedagogical practices (Hodges, et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020). What happened at the onset of the pandemic was sudden and mandatory, often with little or no training of educators in ways to best utilize online platforms for effective teaching and learning (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Fournier, et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020).

From the onset, conditions necessitating ERT affected all students and teachers. The pivot was especially difficult for students with special needs (Akbayrak, et al., 2021; Esposito & Agoratus, 2021; Marshall, et al., 2020; Sakarneh, 2021). There is a large amount of literature explaining how to effectively design and implement online learning as a viable means of instruction for students with disabilities. However, online learning for students with disabilities had not been widely accepted in 2020, considered inferior to traditional in-person instruction (Marshall, et al., 2020). Comparing recommended best practices of online learning (Basham et al., 2015) to the type of online teaching that emerged after March 2020, would be like comparing apples to oranges given the uniqueness and circumstances upon initiation.

For special educators, the pivot to ERT intensified the challenges of teaching and learning (Sakarneh, 2021). Most K-12 teachers are new to online realms, having no training teaching in this environment (Fournier, et al., 2020; Kiekel et al., 2020). Teaching online for students identified with disabilities requires different pedagogies and teaching skills than traditional, in-person classrooms – or even for students without disabilities (Courduff et al., 2022). Classroom dynamics change in a virtual classroom. Students with special needs require regular routines and procedures to help them maximize learning (Courduff et al., 2022; Courduff & Moksari, 2021; Scheffers, et al., 2021). Early in the pandemic, online classrooms disrupted this regular schedule, causing special educators to scramble to find ways to re-establish routines and familiar protocols (Alshamri, 2021). Teachers' ability to read student behavior and to react quickly, crucial for students with special needs, was significantly less feasible in an online modality (Alshamri, 2021; Fournier, et al., 2020; Sakarneh, 2021).

Another challenge was many students with special needs often require the services of more than one provider: teacher, assistive technology coach, occupational and/or physical therapist, speech/language pathologist, audiologist, and mental health providers (Alshamri, 2021; Sakarneh, 2021). What works educationally for any one student may not necessarily work for another in any given classroom. This is especially true for special education

students; thus, creating unique challenges for ensuring that students' individualized education program (IEP) needs were met (Courduff et al., 2022; Esposito & Agoratus, 2021). In many cases, IEPs were found to be lacking because they were not developed to consider support necessary for fully remote learning (Sakarneh, 2021).

The digital divide amplified challenges during the pandemic, especially in inner city and rural areas as families did not have or were not able to afford devices necessary to make remote learning possible (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Fournier, et al., 2020). Students and teachers were often affected by poor internet connectivity, lack of technology knowledge and skills, and emotional distress (deKlerk & Palmer, 2021). Participants found that parental digital literacy skills were lacking, making it difficult for parents to assist their children (Ortiz et. al., 2021; Rice & Ortiz, 2021; Sakarneh, 2021). Teachers new to online teaching reported increased workloads, challenges in using technology, difficulty communicating with parents and students, organizing synchronous learning sessions, and measuring student outcomes. While these difficulties occur even with a gradual transition to a new modality, the suddenness of the pivot intensified these difficulties (Courduff et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2020).

There were many conflicting reports about how to conduct ERT. Experts advised schools to reduce workloads for teachers and students which meant it was difficult in some cases to hold students accountable for their learning or even fail students for not participating (Courduff et al., 2022; Marshall, et al., 2020). In addition to not receiving adequate preparation for using online modalities to teach, teachers reported that the uncertainty of the situation and expected length of ERT meant many did not bring home instructional materials, assuming they would soon be back in school and return to business as usual (Marshall, et al., 2020).

### **Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT)**

HLT is generally used as a model for career counseling. As we analyzed participant responses, we came to see connections of HLT to the experiences of participants. HLT acknowledges that, "human behavior is the product of countless numbers of learning experiences made available by both planned and unplanned situations in which individuals find themselves. The learning outcomes include skills, interests, knowledge, beliefs, preferences, sensitivities, emotions, and future actions" (Krumboltz, 2009, p. 135). The disruptive force of the pandemic created a series of happenstances due to the novel situation educators found themselves in. This disruption required participants to develop skills that allowed them to meet the needs of their students; skills that were often unfamiliar to them.

Unplanned circumstances are a normal part of everyday activities, but the pandemic required that participants develop new skills to overcome the challenges created by these circumstances. For this reason, it was felt HLT was appropriately applied to the findings and discussion.

HLT skills are persistence, flexibility, optimism, and risk-taking (Courduff et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2015). Through persistence educators kept trying to find ways to offer services for their students despite setbacks. Flexibility required educators to change attitudes and uncover new tools and ways to work with their students for the best possible outcomes. Optimism meant being able to see opportunities as possibilities for growth and new learning. Risk-taking was essential in that it required educators to take action, often without knowing what the outcomes would be (Courduff et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2015). Development of these skills allowed participants to act on opportunities presented in hopes of re-establishing some normalcy or control of the situation. As we coded our data, we could see the participants developing these skills.

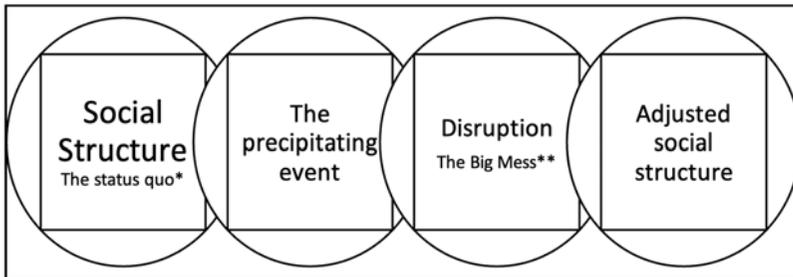
### **Social Disaster Theory**

Social disaster theory assumes that, while disasters happen regularly, the possibility a disaster will affect any one area is very small. Therefore, districts do not, and did not, make plans for a massive pivot to remote teaching and learning due to the minimal possibility such a disaster would strike (Fischer, 2003). COVID-19 forced a new social structure on the entire education system. Kim and Sohn (2018) define social disaster theory as “damage caused by the paralyzation of the state’s backbone systems, such as energy, communication, transportation, finance, medical treatment, and water supply, and by a spread of infectious diseases” (p. 8). This definition omits education, which was immediately impacted by COVID-19. This was evident in the experiences of participants. Marshall et al., (2020) found that no preparation or procedures related to teaching remotely, accessing curricular materials, preparing students, or support in making the transition was discussed prior to the initiation of ERT. The suddenness only increased uncertainty.

An event is not necessarily considered a disaster unless humans and social structures are affected in negative ways (Tierney, 2007). The disruption forces institutions to find new ways to accomplish ordinary tasks (Moore, 1956). The disruptions are dependent upon severity of the disaster and resultant change to previous methods of doing things, requiring a change in social structure to bring the system back to some semblance of normalcy. The virus could, by reasonable definition, be called a disaster.

Accordingly, COVID-19, and its aftermath, caused a significant disruption. The greater the disruption, the greater the social change resulting from the event (Fischer, 2003).

Socially disruptive disasters, such as COVID, have a beginning (the onset of disruption), a middle (the emergency period), and an end (when things return to some new normal) (Tierney, 2007). The beginning of a disaster is usually met with inactivity as people are unable to comprehend the disaster and what it means. The middle period is characterized by attempts to return to normal. Plans often go through many phases during this period as they are made, evaluated, and re-formed until a new normal is found. When the disaster period is deemed to have come to an end, a “next normal” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. i) emerges, which may have little resemblance to the current normal being experienced (Moore, 1956; Tierney, 2007).



**Figure 1.** Linear View of Disaster Disruption and Adjustment.

\*Focus in the Sociology of disaster. \*\*The actual disaster events.

Reprinted with permission (Fischer, 2003).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem is a limited understanding of how special educators made the pivot from traditional, in-person instruction to fully online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. An emergence of research is beginning to appear in the literature (Edyburn, 2020; Ortiz et. al., 2021; Rice & Ortiz, 2021), but the main focus is on tools used by educators during the pivot, primarily in general education classrooms. There is a paucity of literature regarding the lived experiences of special educators regarding specific processes schools and districts used to support fully online learning for special educators and students they teach.

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of special educators across the U.S. during the pivot to fully virtual instruction in PK-12 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Research Question

What are the lived experiences of special educators during the pivot from traditional, in-person to virtual instruction during COVID-19?

### Research Methodology

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in order to understand special educators' perceptions of these pivots or transitions. Our aim, following van Manen (2016), was to "construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences" (p. 19) regarding the unique experiences of special education teachers during the pivot from traditional, in-person to virtual instruction during COVID-19. As Vagle (2018) notes, "phenomenologists ... are not primarily interested in what humans decide, but rather in how they experience their decision-making" (p.21). The pandemic led to a myriad of changes in K-12 but due to the nature of students with special needs, special educators faced unique challenges. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to gain a more complete understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by special educators (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

### *A Note on the Use of Theory in This Study*

The use of theory in phenomenological research has been debated (Vagle, 2018). Neither Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) (Krumboltz, 2009) nor Disaster Theory (Tierney, 2007), both described above, were considered in designing the study, nor should they have been in a phenomenological study. Rather, during data analysis, team members independently encountered the two frameworks, which seemed to add significantly to our understanding of participants' experiences. This is not the place to discuss serendipity in research in general (e.g., Kennedy, et al., 2022), but we did not see being open to it as inconsistent with our phenomenological approach. These theories ultimately ended up informing our interpretation of what we learned. Vagle (2018) and other authors note that phenomenology is not normally "theory-driven," (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 12) and theories are "bracketed" (Vagle, 2018, p. 81). But Vagle also states that "using those same bracketed theories in later analysis to

situate the work in particular fields is equally important” (p. 81), especially with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach we took. Moreover, simply using a “theory” to help explain how individuals experience and make sense of a phenomenon does not preclude that individuals were experiencing the theory. Based on the data in our interviews, our participants were going through a massively disruptive disaster (Disaster Theory) and attempting to persevere (Happenstance Learning Theory).

### ***Data Collection, Participants, and Analysis***

This study utilized recorded interviews and focus groups as valid data sources (Patton, 2002) to understand the experiences of special education teachers during the pivot from in-person to virtual learning during COVID-19. In order to maintain consistency within the interviews, the primary researcher interviewed each of the 46 participants within a six-week time-frame. Two focus groups were conducted. Recorded interviews and focus groups were initially individually coded by team members (see Appendix B). The team met twice a month using video conferencing software to discuss preliminary codes and then cross code for significant statements. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity.

### ***Participants***

As members of the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) Teacher Educator Network (TEN) and the Quality Indicators for Assistive Technology (QIAT) listserv, the research team gained written permission to recruit potential participants through the ISTE Commons, ISTE TEN newsletters, ISTE Twitter, and the QIAT community. We chose these two organizations intentionally because of the potential for soliciting special educators who had experience with technology could be found within them. Forty-six special educators responded to the call for participation and included a nation-wide cross section of special educators representing different sub-groups of special education, including, but not limited to, those who teach students with cognitive, behavioral, social/emotional, and physical disabilities. Participants also included speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, assistive technology specialists, physical therapists, and applied behavior analysis therapists.

**Table 1**  
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	U.S. Region	Years of experience	Highest Degree / Role
Adrienne	West	11	BS: Inclusion teacher
Alex	West	5	MS*: SLP private school
Alexis	West	25	MA: Reading specialist, gifted
Ally	South	20	2 MA's: Instructional tech, HS
Amy	Midwest	25	MA: SLP private elementary, public 6-12
Anne	West	17	MA: Educational therapy, learning specialist
Bernie	EU	20	EdD Special education leadership: AT coordinator, U.S. army, EU
Chantal	Northeast	8	BA: RSP 6th math, co-teacher, reading intervention
Christina	South	22	2 MA's: RSP
Cindy	West	20	MA: AT specialist
Clifford	Midwest	27	MA: Behavior interventionist
Diane	West	5	2 MA's: Art therapist, mod/severe life skills
Erica	South	8	MA: Special Education Coordinator Montessori
George	West	1	MA: Mild/mod
Jane	West	13	MS*: SLP owns her practice/AT specialist
Jeanne	West	5	MS*: SLP public school
Jennifer	West	27	BA: Mod/severe
Jill	West	33	PhD: ELL, Tech coach, inclusion
Kimberly	Northeast	24	MA: Mod/severe non-verbal
Kristin	West	4	MA: Mod/severe 3rd - 5th grade
Laura	West	36	MA: Mod/Severe 18-22 year olds
Linda	Midwest	14	MA: MS and HS Special Education
Lisa	South	14	MA: Adaptive curriculum, mod/severe
Lori	Midwest	26	MS*: SLP elementary
Marcia	Midwest	5	BA: Intervention, autism
Martha	South	1 - started in January of 2020	BA: Private Catholic HS mild/mod
Mary	Midwest	19	EdD: RSP
Maureen	Northeast	10	6 certificates in SpEd: Learning specialist, RSP
Mike	West	15	BA: RSP
Norah	West	24	MA: OT, K-5 MS

**Table 1, Continued**

Pseudonym	U.S. Region	Years of experience	Highest Degree / Role
Pat	West	9	MA: SDC tk-2nd
Patricia	West	6	MA: SDC primary, AT coach
Patty	Northeast	6	PhD: Mod/severe
Penny	West	10-15	MS*; SLP, behavior therapy, AT specialist
Rachel	West	1	MA: Learning specialist, co-teacher
Rebekah	West	18	MA: AT specialist
Roberta	Northeast	25	MS MS*: SLP speech audiology MS, HS
Ruth	Midwest	21	MS*: SLP private middle school
Samara	South	5	MA: Special Education, lead teacher
Stephanie	West	29	MA: Special Education, SDC elementary
Terry	West	18	MA and MS*: SLP
Theresa	West	20	EdD: assistant superintendent Special Education
Toni	Midwest	10	MA: Functional life skills, MS
Tony	Midwest	35	PhD: Superintendent
Traci	South	10	MA: K-2 mod/severe
Whitney	Midwest	16	EdD: HS, community college

Note. AT = assistive technology; BA = bachelor of arts; BS = bachelor of science; EdD = doctor of education; EU = Europe; HS = high school; MA = master of arts; Mild/mod = mild to moderate disabilities; Mod/severe = moderate to severe disabilities; MS = middle school; MS\* = master of science; PhD = doctor of philosophy; RSP = resources specialist program; SDC = special day class; SLP = speech language pathologist

**Analysis.** The research team analyzed data by coding and cross coding for significant statements, and combining statements into themes. Before, during, and after data collection, we strove to bracket or “bridle” (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2018) our own assumptions about the phenomenon, while at the same time considering how our assumptions and personal experiences helped us understand the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). Memos and frequent discussions among the research team served as a “post-reflexion” (Vagle, 2018) which consistently challenged our own taken-for-granted assumptions and experiences of the pandemic. Participants were provided with all data pertaining to them, the initial coding, and initial interpretation of the data. Each participant was invited to provide further context, clarification, or correction of data analysis and reporting.

## FINDINGS

In order to understand how the phenomenon emerged over the course of the pandemic, we discovered the pivot from traditional, in-person to virtual or hybrid learning occurred in three distinct windows of time.

1. Spring 2020, begins with the abrupt closure of schools and pivot to ERT in mid-March 2020. What was to be a three-week break lasted through the end of the academic year.
2. Summer 2020, schools and districts closed for the summer.
3. Fall 2020, schools and districts transitioned to virtual teaching and learning supported by online learning pedagogy.

We present the findings holistically in the order in which they occurred.

### Spring 2020

Participants described being thrust into teaching chaos. Teachers were primarily left to their own technical, pedagogical, and personal devices as schools scrambled to enter an arena they had never prepared for. Even schools that had offered online courses found those models ineffective. Special education teachers experienced phenomena like “chaos,” “isolation,” and “virtual,” in multiple ways. Instead of one big “pivot,” special education teachers experienced multiple pivots over many months.

#### *Chaos and Uncertainty*

The word “chaos” repeatedly described the days beginning mid-March, 2020. For some teachers it was “clean out your lockers, take home your iPads and chargers” (Ruth). For others, chaos meant the team they were used to working with ceased to function, especially in their role as special educators. The community was broken. Amy noted, “the job requires you to work with a team, but the team is more fragile than I realized.” Teachers were faced with sudden isolation. Nearly all participants noted that the administration came to teachers on March 13, 2020, and said, “Pack your stuff, we are going remote.” Norah stated “My special education director came out and said, ‘OK everyone, go home. We’re going into a shelter in place. We’re done. And when I know anything, I’ll let you know.’”

For some teachers and school leaders, the response to chaos was to practice “calmness within chaos” (Theresa), but for others, training and work habits became moot. “I’m a planner and I can’t plan.... I like to control, but I can’t” (Rachel). Participants reported spring to be a tumultuous time with continuous changes in procedures, processes, and protocols. “The Department of Education kept changing what the plans were...and parents were upset” (Diane). Jane explained, “I just started

emailing and calling on my parents and saying, look, I'm still here. We're still doing this work. We're going to do the best we can."

Relationships became uncertain. Teachers didn't feel comfortable with their professional competence. "We look like idiots because we don't know what we're doing. There was a lot of feeling embarrassed and ashamed and thinking that we weren't doing what we were supposed to" (Jill). At that point in the year, Jill implied, she and her colleagues couldn't even rely on each other to solve problems.

### ***Being Virtual***

"Virtual" did not mean the same for all teachers, especially regarding instruction and connecting with students and parents. Penny found her version of virtual didn't work very well with many parents or mod/severe students. Even though districts didn't know what they were going to do, Penny automatically headed to virtual teaching on her own. Toni found it was best to jump right in and start. "We just got on and tried to figure out what would work best for parents. I honestly had some parents that were not concerned about education. 'Hey, I've got five kids at home.' We are all doing just what we can to kind of get through and get by. And so, biweekly I would try to touch base with parents."

Teaching virtually was not simply a matter of technological know-how, and it did not work well for Lori. She received conflicting directives from the school and district. Parents, students, and teachers were confused by different recommended tools like Seesaw and Google Classroom. Lori's early expectations for virtual teaching were to simply "maintain skills," rather than develop new ones. For teachers like Lori, "virtual" was tightly connected to communication with parents to keep everything calm in the midst of chaos. Virtual teaching also became associated with "giving grace," a term she grew to be sick of.

### ***Experiencing Isolation and Optimism***

Teachers experiencing isolation sometimes questioned their value. "So, for me, I'm really a satellite. They really don't have energy to absorb me into that window of 'let's pull the speech therapist into this planning!' I learned very quickly that I am an island" (Amy). Some paraprofessional colleagues were deemed non-essential. This not only contributed to feeling isolated, but also decreased morale and increased workload. "They told all the para[professionals] they were non-essential, so my assistants were sitting at home doing absolutely nothing and I was doing all this craziness all by myself" (Stephanie).

Participants were doing the best they could to keep some semblance of communication going to families. Some participants stated that administrators focused most heavily on the needs of general education teachers and families. The rationale was that special educators teach fewer students and/or offer services part time. Pat explained, "I do think that it was very clear that special ed are not the majority." Ruth added, "the administration made it very clear 'we don't want to hear your whining.'"

Isolation on the surface, seems pejorative, but some teachers took advantage of isolation to learn and to create. For Samara, the situation wasn't "that bad." She found she had some time to create her own materials and learn how to leverage technology to continue working with autistic students. She stated, "I looked at it as an opportunity to just utilize that time to work towards things that would be beneficial when we got back into the classroom." Other participants directly addressed isolation by creating opportunities for mutual support. Stephanie started a teacher support group for anyone in her county working with kindergarten through sixth grade children with moderate to severe disabilities. "And I had a Zoom and now we do them like once a month, and I also put it on Google Classroom and we share tips on there."

### ***Parents: Communication, Connection, and Collaboration***

Relationships with parents was a major theme in the pandemic. In some cases, communication was mainly seen as a technical issue. For others, communication became windows into the parents', students', and teachers' worlds. Terry had taught 18 years in a diverse west coast district with a caseload of 80 high school-aged students. He taught online, had technological proficiency, and good administrative and district support. He stated he quickly learned the importance of connecting and collaborating with parents, noting he only saw students for a short time and the experience was imperfect because it was online. Individual time online was seen as an opportunity to get parents more involved in students' education and IEP meetings. As the year progressed, Terry saw these connections occurring with students as well, especially with how he found himself dealing with social-emotional learning. Beyond parents and students, Terry noted how his whole school seemed to be functioning more as a connected team because of the pivot.

Social-emotional learning was a powerful connecting factor for Patty. In one of our most upbeat interviews, Patty stressed love, empathy, and respect for students and especially parents. Patty taught Title 1 students with few resources. She loves the students and they love her, so they made it work. She did "whatever it takes," including calling parents on her personal phone (discouraged by the school, but impressing parents). In the end, she found

the spring to be “fun!” She seemed to enjoy the virtual experience. Linda shared her positive experience.

My district is very supportive and proactive. The only way this works is through the amount of collaboration between staff and families. [Our state] gave two options in March 2020-mandatory or optional learning. Most schools chose the optional learning route. So, teachers continued to teach and provide lessons online but students didn't have to participate if they couldn't or families chose not to. I think our special education population ranked as the highest percentage of participation. My families 100% communicated and participated!

Personal connection and love may have been more important than knowledge of technology in coping with the pandemic, and social-emotional factors appeared frequently in interviews.

Parents, tired of the frequent messaging some schools required. As Diane stated, “We were required to make at least one weekly phone call every single week, to the point where parents were like, ‘Hey, please stop calling me. This is a lot.’” Norah explained other parents wanted more communication, sometimes “chomping at the bit” for needed services. For some teachers there was a language barrier when trying to contact parents. For parents just trying to survive, school had to come second. Toni explained, “I honestly had some parents that were really not concerned about education...we are all doing just what we can to kind of get through and get by.” Communication, which in normal times would have been acceptable, became part of the problem.

Sometimes communications broke down, which was embarrassing for teachers. Alexis found parents would get “notified about things before the teachers,” which she described as an “ongoing battle.” Pat noted contradictory or confusing messaging to parents undermined trust in teachers:

So that Monday, [administration told us] okay, call everybody [parents], and the next Wednesday, they're like, hold on, wait, we need you to read this script and...things were changing on how we did it. So then if you'd already talked to your parents, you look like you didn't know what you're talking about because things had already changed, which was really hard for the parents. I'm the first line of defense...they don't go to the district. And so when they hear me say, ‘oh, I, I don't know’, or ‘I'm sorry, I gave you the wrong information, it's now like this,’ it's very difficult because the parents start to lose their trust.’

The inconsistency of shared information left participants feeling confused and, at times, inept.

### ***Perceptions of Equity and Technology***

Participants seemed very aware of inequities existing among districts, schools, and classrooms. Some teachers realized they had advantages. This was true for Roberta. "My district is one to one. So, we were very fortunate... each of us had a laptop." Alexis stated, "We had already used Google Classroom...as an early adopter of technology, I'm a tech innovator for the district." For schools without technology or expertise, however, it was very difficult. "It's interesting because I have some friends that work in other schools where they're dealing with a lot of poverty, and there's the inequity of kids that don't have devices or don't have WIFI or good internet service" (Alexis).

Inequity directly affected how teachers were able to work with their students. "You might have four kids in a family and they're all sharing a cell phone to do their work and prioritizing, 'oh this child is in special ed, he can just not get any right now. Johnny's a junior in high school, he's got to get priority over you sitting and listening to a story'" (Kimberly).

Some teachers, students, and parents were unprepared to handle the technology, while others were able to make change quickly. "I would say I was not really prepared and it has been a trial by fire. A lot of trial and error" (Norah). Jill agreed, "Many teachers [were] technophobic, others not so technophobic, but they weren't ready for this." As Kimberly stated:

They're [students] forced into a reality that they themselves were not ready. And I think that's one of the biggest issues that we've had with using technology for learning in a virtual environment...Now they're being forced to collaborate and when you look at special ed kids, they're like, um, what's collaborate mean?

Diane further explained, "Well, in a classroom, students with life skills, so much of everything is hands on. And how do you do hand over hand instruction when you can't touch the kid to help them out?" In some cases, technology helped students. Stephanie explained that going all virtual worked really well for students on the autism spectrum, "It's crazy. The two that I have right now are perfect. They like it. I think because they like the screen and they like the consistency, because I do the same thing every day and they're like a machine, whereas people are kind of confusing." Stephanie continued,

I have one that doesn't [like technology]. But he wasn't in my class last year...he doesn't really know my ways and doesn't have a personal attachment to me. I think that's why it's harder for him. Plus, his house is a hot mess. He's got two twin kindergarteners [siblings] and the mom is tired because she works all night. So, it's just a madhouse, but the other two are so good.

Situations varied greatly from home to home, and participants did their best to provide equitable learning experiences.

Some teachers were fortunate to have peers to guide them. Kimberly said, "There was a teacher at that school who loved technology and she's like, 'I don't know if you're into technology, but I'll go over it with you if you're interested.' And she showed me something and I'm like, yeah, give me ALL of it. My students need to be able to do this."

Pat explained the new responsibilities that came with virtual teaching:

This is a strange new role that I have taken on as a teacher, I'm more working with parents to help them help their children access technology. I make sure they can get onto the Zoom meetings, make sure...the settings are right or if they can hear me. There's been a lot of things that have been difficult, because everybody has a different device.

Things seemed easier for some rural teachers because virtual therapy was more common. Jane said, "I know there's been loads of people who have been doing this virtually for a very long time. So in rural areas...they have loads of experience." Different devices, platforms, levels of experience, and living conditions resulted in different levels of equity and technology access.

### ***Caring and Compliance***

Towards the end of spring ethical and legal issues began to arise, such as having two or more special needs students in a single Zoom room. There was also new insight into the home life of students that was new to special educators. Amy stated, "I didn't know how I could ethically put two kids in the same room and have parents from other families witnessing what was on the screen." Norah reported an incident that happened via a Zoom IEP meeting. "In the middle of our IEP, we can hear mom yelling at her other kids to get him because he's like running down the street half-naked." Some special educators were told to minimize instruction to one phone call or email per family per week. Others were told to reduce workloads for students. In late spring, Patricia shared a significant problem for special education teachers:

Special Ed was told the timelines have not stopped. So, we were overdue. 400 IEPs. We were overdue on these things. We were told now, NOW we need to hold all of these amendments to incorporate distance learning. We had to scramble and write all of these amendments and they said, 'uh, we need this done by Friday.' We're starting to scramble and write all these amendments and then we're trying to hold all these IEPs, with what data? And, you know, none of the data was accurate... So, I had one whole week to schedule all my IEPs. And then the next teacher had another week because parents and some teachers were not comfortable using Zoom for IEP meetings, all of the IEP meetings were postponed until August.

When administration began to understand the ramifications of letting IEP requirements go unchecked, they felt a sudden need to maintain and rewrite IEPs for current conditions. This responsibility fell on the shoulders of the special educators.

### **Summer 2020**

Summer 2020, which should have been the “great transition” period, was perceived as very different from previous years as teachers scrambled to rework lesson plans and learn to use more technology. Because of continuing pandemic lockdowns, most participants faced particularly unclear directives, often finding themselves on their own, without guidance, as they tried to anticipate needs for the coming school year.

#### ***Chaos and Uncertainty***

The chaos and uncertainty of spring continued. Ruth observed, “All summer long I would say, ‘listen what is the plan? It was in July...Like we were almost to the purple level [a dangerous COVID infection rate] and you know, are we ever going to go back? [to school].”

For other teachers and administrators, it was possible to “go with the flow” (Rachel) and practice “calmness within chaos” (Theresa). Erica noted that during summer “we started thinking about when we would start bringing kids back to campus, how is that going to be prioritized...We were really intentional in our planning.” Diane was invited to participate on a summer “planning committee,” but found decisions had already been made and she was there to check off a box.

### *Administration*

Administrative communication failure contributed to confusion. Stephanie reported “I did hear from [the district] that they were planning things in the summer, that they had committees and I would go to board meetings, and then I would hear nothing.”

Roberta stated, “I spent my entire summer going through every single lesson, making sure it could work completely online for the students.” Without communication from administration, participants took time in the summer to revamp lessons, feeling fall would be an extension of spring and not wanting to feel as incompetent as they had in the spring.

### *Professional Development/Preparation for Fall*

Some districts offered training in the summer, but, “often they’re not special education-specific [trainings],” (Norah). Amy observed,

They would say, ‘oh, this is what elementary school teachers need, they need to know how to use Google Classroom and post assignments’ and I’m like, ‘but that doesn’t fit with my teaching.’ Or we’d watch something for the high school and they said, ‘well, you don’t need to see this.’...My accrediting agency, ASHA – American Speech and Hearing Association – offered their online continuing education, ...offered [training] for free until June 30, so you could go and take their recorded training for free and get the credits. So in June, I was kind of a madwoman.

With professional development offerings from districts oriented towards general education teachers, many participants found their own resources. Summer did little to assuage the fear, uncertainty, and chaos. The administrations’ inability to plan for the fall until August did little to quell participants’ concerns.

## **Fall 2020**

### *Connection*

Special education is highly relationship-driven, hands-on, and individualized. Because of this, special educators had few specific protocols for reaching students virtually. Special educators often work as part of a team to benefit their students. As remote teaching continued in the fall, relationships were not always able to be maintained. Amy stated that prior to the pandemic, she worked with a team of eight people. After the pivot, “planning was very challenging...so it didn’t work, but people were trying.”

Some participants used virtual modalities to create new relationships with parents, general education colleagues, and even administrators. Erica noted, "Teachers are reaching out a little more than they might in a normal year." Some participants were able to create relationships with other special educators as they collaborated on ways to use technology to be successful with their students. Stephanie continued her Facebook group for K-6 special educators, continuing monthly Zoom "happy hours" and using Google Classroom for members to share tips. Norah also noted turning to social media. "I am actually in a Facebook group for therapists and I have received a ton of ideas that have actually been really good." Erica noted new relationships with parents developed when she became a liaison between parents and general education teachers, stating her team became the "main contact for parents to take the responsibility off of the gen ed teachers." She also said that "every time a child is not on a call, we're on the phone." However, not all parental relationships were amicable. Ruth, who teaches at a private institution made this note regarding parents:

A lot of them don't understand boundaries and then there's also a piece of parental entitlement, like, you know, 'we're paying for this service and we expect the full concierge,' like getting upset with me on a Tuesday morning because they sent an email at 11:30 Monday night and I haven't responded yet.

For communication to work, it was often necessary to coach parents. Alex, a private clinician whose wife works with students with special needs in a public district, was able to bring multiple perspectives to the issue. For him, "proactive communication" was crucial. Teachers needed to communicate with students to assure them of "small wins," even in an online environment. Schools and districts needed to communicate to get out needed materials to support those "small wins." According to Alex, without the "small wins," parents might conclude there were "no wins," and give up on school, and ultimately their child's potential. This theme was repeated in multiple interviews, and even formalized as "parent coaching" by Bernie. Pat explained that coaching parents included troubleshooting technology and helping parents understand the basics of teaching a student with severe behaviors:

It's very difficult to have to help all the parents access the different modes of technology that we've been utilizing. A big part of my teaching is teaching parents. It's been very difficult because...I've also had to tell them different strategies that we use to help their child tolerate work. I think every single parent has told me at least once that 'oh, well, my child just doesn't

listen to me,' or 'they listen to you better,' and it's been funny because they don't listen to me, either. I just don't give up, it's more of like, 'No, no, this has to happen.' It's the consistency and I have the advantage of being in a different environment. I'm not asking the kids to do hard things at their house. I'm asking to do hard things in the classroom space and so that's where my advantage begins and parents don't have that.

Teacher's couldn't do it all, so it was necessary to coach parents to understand the technology and the basics of working with their children.

### *Life*

Participants noted a lot was learned by teachers and parents regarding details of home and classroom life. Samara observed parents gained insight into what is actually happening in the classroom:

So, I think that's been a huge thing. My parents all loved me, I mean that ... I have great relationships with all of my parents...I'm getting to see their kid and how their kid learns, and how their kid behaves in an academic situation, which has been huge for them.

Parent teacher relationships were critical for student success but could also be strained by the constant access during Zoom meetings. Norah explained:

When you have a parent there the whole time, it increases my anxiety because I'm like, 'oh my god, this must go well, I must be able to meet this child's needs over Zoom.' I am starting to let that go and give myself more grace. No one's perfect and I think it actually allows me to give parents a lot more grace.

Parent experience and understanding varied across situations. Some families were very involved in daily school experiences while others simply were not, due to work duties, multiple children in the home, multiple children with disabilities in the home, illness, and simply trying to get through each day. There were misunderstandings of what a child could accomplish on their own. "So that was kind of hard because you know students might be like, 'Oh yeah, I know how to do this mom,' and mom or dad might be like, 'What are you talking about?' It was definitely tricky" (Roberta). Amy stated:

I just don't feel like our society is growing the way it needs to, and maybe this [virtual learning] being forced to the forefront shows how we are educating our children. How are we providing equitable instruction, regardless of income, regardless of language, and forcing us to say, 'Are you reaching parents, are you providing what needs to be done so that we have a connection?' And we're building the system. So, that is going to make our educational system stronger, and will make our kids better learners. I guess my positive is that I feel like maybe we've got better connections and insights into people's families and more empathy as to what they're dealing with, so that we can make a bigger jump to help them in the future.

The issues being faced by parents and teachers was definitely eye-opening from both the home and school perspectives.

### *Optimism*

For many teachers, there was still optimism, even about being isolated and working alone. For Samara, the situation wasn't "that bad" because she found time to create her own materials and learn how to handle technology to continue working with her students on the autism-spectrum. As she stated, "I looked at it as an opportunity to just utilize that time to work towards things that would be beneficial when we got back into the classroom." The optimism seemed to be based on individual initiative and creativity, not on school or district support.

### *Administration and Structure*

Lack of support from administration continued to be problematic. Fall data revealed a continued sense of instability and inconsistency from all levels. Everyone was doing the best they could, and, since there are far fewer special educators in a school or district than general educators (<https://nces.ed.gov/>), it's reasonable to assume that administrators focused on the wide stroke – to help the most people possible in the least amount of time.

Toni explained that processes for conducting virtual instruction in general education became consistent. Due to the individualized nature of special education, finding consistency in virtual instruction was next to impossible. In some cases, consistency was impeded when administrators took early retirement. Pat explained, "We lost our superintendent, one of our assistant superintendents, and the director of special education. All three of those positions are [now] filled with people who are brand new to

our district. So, that's going to be a difficult transition in the midst of all this." Lack of structure, loss of administrative personnel, differing opinions about conducting teaching and learning continued to plague appropriate IEP development. It also complicated the timing and process for returning to school. Participants reported that special education teachers and students were the first to return to campus resulting in increasingly complex work environments. Pat explained:

I have to fully devote my attention to the kids on the computer, as well as those in the other room, and those at home. You know, I feel like it kind of burdens them when I'm with them because I can't help them very much with actively supporting my students. A lot of my kids require hand over hand support or different visual support to prompts and so they're kind of left to do a lot of that on their own without me as an additional support; which has made it very difficult.

Special educators, such as Ruth, added explanation of the stressful nature of hybrid instruction:

Okay, so a study skills class was challenging this fall. It consists of anywhere from 17 to 20 kids. In the beginning when we were at 25% [in person], most of my class was online, but I had four students looking at me from their socially distanced parts of the classroom. I just felt like, you know, I don't want to ignore the kids that are online. But then I found myself talking into the computer and not looking at the kids who were in the room...This isn't working.

Lori ended the hybrid conversation by saying, "I didn't realize it [virtual teaching] was going to be so hard to talk about. I mean, just because emotionally, it was very tough and it still is and I just don't agree with us being back in school." Special educators were essentially tasked with virtual learning, in person learning, and monitoring students in school attending general education sessions online.

### ***Perceptions of Value***

Participants felt devalued when administrators instructed them to serve as substitutes for teachers who called in sick. Stephanie explained, "And then in August, I come to find out that my principal said we're not going to have any subs and we were expected to teach each other's classes. And I thought, wow, I'm overwhelmed with 10, how am I going to teach 20, and I don't even know these people!"

For most participants, morale was low at the time of the interviews. Kimberly said, "You have teachers who are just tired. And it's not even a physical tired. It is an emotional tired. It's the psychological tired. It's the beat down because I am reading on social media how I'm useless." Pat echoed, "Oh yeah, absolutely. I have never felt like my voice has mattered less. And I think part of it has to do with the change in upper administration. That is a big factor as well."

Although most participants felt undervalued and just plain tired, a few still spoke positively about the entire experience – spring to fall. Regarding how her instruction has changed during the pandemic, Linda explained:

I feel like I've always been flexible/prepared but this made me feel like I'm always 'treading water.' I feel like this year I try to be super prepared for every situation but it's impossible. I had a month where I had two associates that were out with COVID. I feel like this has taught adults and students a lot of resilience.

Being able to voice their thoughts to another person and having someone listen helped relieve some of the emotion associated with their experience.

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they had anything to add. From this question the research team began to understand the weight each participant carried. "Thank you for doing this for us," said one. "I didn't realize how many feelings I still have about this," said another. "You need to interview my wife; her experience is completely different from mine because she's in public education. And thank you for the work you do." "I didn't know that anyone cared about us," said a third. Every participant confirmed the cathartic nature of the study.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to understand the phenomenon experienced by special educators resulting from the pivot to ERT. As the researchers analyzed transcripts and discussed poignant quotes to find common themes, we noticed the experiences of participants seemed to display characteristics associated with both happenstance learning (HLT) (Krumboltz, 2007), and social disaster (Tierney, 2009) theories – theories of which we were aware, but had not been previously applied to educational situations. This discovery added depth and understanding of the lived experiences. Conducting 46 interviews in a six-week time frame enabled complete immersion in data collection. Themes emerged rapidly due to the intensity of the collection window. One member of the team was on a 100% lockdown, allowing this intensely tight window.

The first connection to HLT emerged around completion of the 30th interview. Terms related to persistence, risk-taking, flexibility, and optimism stood out. Specific questions regarding lessons learned resulted in obvious connections to HLT. The interviewer used memoing to note specific words and phrases, sharing these with the research team at regular meetings. During discussions, we considered what we could learn from these results that might add to each theory and showing connection to educational circumstances.

### **Structural / Procedural Themes Related to HLT and Social Disaster Theories**

HLT and social disaster theory brought out structural and procedural themes participants were required to overcome: uncertainty, lack of communication, lack of administrative leadership, unknown ethics of remote teaching and IEP development, workload, access to devices, access to training, AT/AAC support. Participants were left to their own devices as schools scrambled for something they were unprepared for. Other issues revolved around hybrid classes. These classes were often unmanageable, generally creating double work: in-person and virtual. Many participants noted districts had no plans in place for what teaching and learning looked like at any point throughout 2020.

### **Relational Themes Related to HLT**

Relationships are important aspects of teaching and a component of HLT. Participants didn't feel comfortable. Some took this personally. Others felt they were on their own. Those who felt on their own expressed isolation in ways which made them question their value. When colleagues were initially deemed "non-essential," it not only contributed to this feeling, but also led to an increased workload. New relationships were established with parents, which partially involved coaching them to work with their children and use technology. Some simply learned who the parents were: customs, cultures, languages, and more.

### **Dispositional Themes Related to HLT**

The pandemic created novel situations requiring educators to find solutions (Krumboltz, 2009). Interviews concluded with "What have you learned about yourself?" Responses aligned with dispositional skills of HLT: Persistence, flexibility, risk-taking, and optimism. Attempting a variety of actions, evaluating results, and remaining alert for opportunities presented (Krumboltz, 2009), participants found ways to serve students. Issues were overcome with lessons learned falling in line with HLT pillars.

### ***Persistence***

With lack of leadership and chaos encountered, participants were forced to search out solutions. Their drive showed persistence. They spent hours searching for potential solutions. Without persistence, why would they put in so many hours to find solutions?

### ***Flexibility***

Ethical issues related to working with students via Zoom left special educators wondering how to interact with their students. Could they legally have two or more students on a Zoom call with parents or other family members watching what was happening? This required participants to be flexible in meeting students, often spending personal time.

### ***Risk-taking***

Teaching via Zoom was new and novel, as was using technology. Educators took risks trying different technologies - not knowing the outcome. When they worked, educators relished in small victories. When they did not, they searched again for new ways to adapt to students' emerging needs.

### ***Optimism***

Seeing the end results of efforts, participants saw pockets of hope in their accomplishments. There was optimism even though isolated and working alone. The optimism seemed to be based on individual initiative and creativity, rather than school or district support. Accomplishments of students left teachers feeling optimistic not only about what they could do online, but also when things returned to normal.

### **Future Research**

Little research exists about preparing parents for online learning (Courduff et al., 2022; Rice & Ortiz, 2021). Participants commented on the varying abilities of parents to assist their student due to lack of technology, digital literacy skills, or recognition of basic needs of their child. Another potential research topic: how to involve parents in the learning process in the event of future educational emergencies. Additionally, participants felt marginalized and unheard, often thanking researchers for the opportunity to talk about their experiences. We recommend future research on cathartic possibilities of interviewing teachers and parents within the special education community. A corresponding topic would be educator support and self-care in disaster situations. Finally, when a "new normal" returns, we recommend a follow up study on the longitudinal impact of the pandemic on teaching practices of the original participants.

## CONCLUSION

In phenomenological research, we seek to understand lived experiences of people who have shared a phenomenon. Through listening to and examining the retelling of those experiences, we pieced together a communal story. In this case, we listened to the COVID-19 pivot stories of 46 special educators from across the country. The study was limited to in-service special education teachers and those providing services to students with disabilities. The study is further limited to public and private schools servicing TK through 12th grade students. Analysis of participants' stories indicate that, although special educators experienced extreme challenges, they were persistent, flexible, risk-takers, and optimistic. This aligns with previous research (Courduff et al., 2016). In order to truly make change to practice, we must advocate for changes in policy (Courduff et al., 2022; Courduff & Muktari, 2021; Karlsson et al., 2018; Gomez-Navarro, 2020). Research and professional development intentionally developed to foster collaboration and a sense of shared work may increase common understanding between sub-groups of educators. Policy changes related to ways special educators, general educators, administrators, and parents are prepared may eliminate these known issues. The greatest potential for change lies in efforts of policymakers and leaders to understand and address the deep needs, and great strengths, of special educators.

## DECLARATIONS

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## APPENDIX A COMMON ACRONYMS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Acronym	Term	Definition
AAC	Augmentative and alternative communication	Tools that support a person who has difficulty communicating using speech ( <a href="http://www.asha.org">www.asha.org</a> ).
ABA	Applied behavior and analysis	A therapy based on the science of learning and behavior ( <a href="http://www.autismspeaks.org">www.autismspeaks.org</a> ).
AT	Assistive technology	Any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities ( <a href="http://www.atia.org">www.atia.org</a> ).
GenEd	General educators	Educators who teach students in multiple subject or single subject classrooms ( <a href="http://www.ed.gov">www.ed.gov</a> ).
IEP	Individualized education program	Programs developed for students with cognitive, behavioral, physical, and communication disorders ( <a href="http://www.understood.org">www.understood.org</a> ).
Mild/Mod	Mild to moderate disabilities	Students have high incident disabilities (e.g. eligibility categories of autism, learning disability, emotional/behavioral disorders, language delays). Students are typically on diploma track and will be served in general education (inclusive settings). Services may use the titles of resource specialist or teachers in a special day class. Students may have variable academic performance, attending (distractible) behaviors, and/or social behavioral needs ( <a href="http://www.fresnostate.edu/catalog/subjects/lit-early-biling-spec-ed/prlm-ml-d-m.html">http://www.fresnostate.edu/catalog/subjects/lit-early-biling-spec-ed/prlm-ml-d-m.html</a> ).
Mod/Severe	Moderate to severe disabilities	Students have lower incidence disabilities (e.g. eligibility categories of autism, learning disability, emotional/behavioral disorders, language delays). Students are served in a range of settings, such as center-based sites, special day classes, and some inclusive and/or integrated settings. Students may have academic, functional, communication, and vocational learning needs ( <a href="http://www.fresnostate.edu/catalog/subjects/lit-early-biling-spec-ed/prlm-ml-d-m.html">http://www.fresnostate.edu/catalog/subjects/lit-early-biling-spec-ed/prlm-ml-d-m.html</a> ).
OT	Occupational therapist	Occupational therapists treat patients who have injuries, illnesses, or disabilities through the therapeutic use of everyday activities ( <a href="https://www.bls.gov/ooH/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm">https://www.bls.gov/ooH/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm</a> ).
Para	Paraprofessional	An individual who is employed in a preschool, elementary school, or secondary school under the supervision of a certified or licensed teacher, including individuals employed in language instruction educational programs, special education, and migrant education (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA] Section 3201, 20 United States Code [U.S.C.] Section 7011[11]). The term, "paraprofessional," also known as "paraeducator," includes an education assistant and instructional assistant (ESSA Section 3201, 20 U.S.C. 8108[37]).
PT	Physical therapist	Physical therapists help injured or ill people improve movement and manage pain ( <a href="https://www.bls.gov/ooH/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm">https://www.bls.gov/ooH/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm</a> ).
RSP	Resource specialist program teacher	Also known as specialized academic instructor (SAI). They typically serve students with mild to moderate disabilities in a pull-out or push-in format.
SLP	Speech language pathologist	Educators who work with persons with articulation, fluency, expressive language, reception language, and swallowing disorders ( <a href="http://www.asha.org">www.asha.org</a> ).
SpEd	Special educators	Educators who teach students with a range of disabilities including, but not limited to, mild/moderate or moderate/severe disabilities ( <a href="http://www.naset.org">www.naset.org</a> ).
TK	Transitional kindergarten	Transitional kindergarten (TK) is a school grade that serves as a bridge between preschool and kindergarten, to provide students with time to develop fundamental skills needed for success in school in a setting that is appropriate to the student's age and development ( <a href="https://www.first5california.com/en-us/articles/what-is-tk-and-kindergarten-preschooler">https://www.first5california.com/en-us/articles/what-is-tk-and-kindergarten-preschooler</a> ).
UDL	Universal design for learning	A framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning based on scientific insights into how people learn. ( <a href="http://www.cast.org">www.cast.org</a> )

## APPENDIX B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions were intentionally open-ended as is appropriate for phenomenological research (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

1. Demographic questions
  - a) How many years have you been teaching?
  - b) What is your highest degree?
  - c) What work assignments have you had throughout your career?
  - d) What is your current work assignment?
  - e) How many students are on your caseload?
  
2. Tell me about your experiences when you learned that you were going to pivot to all virtual instruction in the spring of 2020.
  - a) What happened first?
  - b) What did you do about it?
  - c) How did you handle virtual instruction during the spring?
  - d) How did you handle communication with families?
  
3. Tell me about your experiences in the summer of 2020.
  - a) What guidelines did your district provide in preparing for the fall?
  - b) What virtual training opportunities did you attend?
  - c) How did you prepare with other special educators and/or general educators in your school or district?
  - d) If you did not prepare with other educators, why not?
  - e) How did your instruction change from your previous years teaching?
  
4. Looking back on this fall of 2020, what lessons have you learned to improve your practice as you move into 2021?
  
5. What have you learned during the entire process - spring to now- during the pivot to virtual learning?
  - a) About yourself
  - b) About your teaching
  - c) About how you were prepared for teaching virtually
  
6. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Upon initial data coding completion, the research team met and determined preliminary themes. We conducted open-ended conversations around the following themes. The themes were preliminary and not in any particular order of importance.

1. Crisis themes (Spring 2020)
2. Preparation themes (Summer 2020)
3. Lessons learned (Fall-Winter, 2020/21)
4. Overall process themes (Spring 2020 to present)