# Experiences of Teachers of Students With Disabilities and Extensive Support Needs During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Administrator Considerations for Equitable Education

*Grace L. Francis, Alexandra S. Reed, and Kelly Conn-Reda*

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with disabilities and extensive support needs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nine educators who taught in a public school district during the 2020 pandemic engaged in interviews at three points of time, when: (a) schools closed in March, (b) during summer break, and (c) when schools reopened in September. Participants described the challenges they faced transitioning to online instruction and back to face-to-face instruction, including: (a) failing to equip students with technology skills, (b) difficulty adapting instructional techniques, (c) inability to access student materials and resources, (d) discomfort with temporary IEPs, (e) dependency on families "acting as a paraprofessional," and (f) safety and logistical barriers. Administrative support, or the lack thereof, underpinned all discussions. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

Key Words: COVID-19, severe disability, education, barriers, administrators, principals, students with disabilities, support needs, equity, equitable

## Introduction

An aggressive variant of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread rapidly in 2020, resulting in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) ordering states of emergency and "stay at home" orders to stymie the transmission of the virus. By the end of March 2020, over 50 million families of U.S. K–12 students scrambled to turn kitchen tables into desks, while teachers frantically set up online classrooms with as little as a few days' notice (Education Week, 2020; Hong et al., 2021; Schaefer et al., 2020). Research documents the toll that shifting to online instruction in the face of a global pandemic took on students, families, and teachers, including routine disruption, acute and chronic stress, and scrambling to secure needed resources (e.g., technology, childcare, instructional supplies; Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023; Pfefferbaum, 2021). The majority of research and media reports, however, narrowly document the experiences of students without disabilities, failing to acknowledge the specialized needs of over 7.2 million students with disabilities in the U.S. (Lipkin & Crepeau-Hobson, 2023; Pressley, 2021; Schaeffer, 2023). In addition, students with disabilities receive special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004). As a result, special education teachers were not only faced with shifting specialized instruction online like other teachers, but also had to navigate challenges associated with providing legally mandated IEP services (Chen et al., 2022; Nadworny & Kamenetz, 2020).

A population of teachers who are nearly unrepresented in research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic are educators of students with disabilities who have extensive support needs (ESN; i.e., students with a cognitive disability, autism, and/or multiple severe disabilities who require sustained support across settings). Given the complex and pervasive nature of needs among students with ESN, special educators who teach this population of students maintain responsibilities that other educators do not hold, including providing care services (e.g., feeding, toileting), facilitating student augmentative and alternative communication devices and programs, and physically positioning students to ensure comfort and health—all in addition to providing students with high-quality instruction (Browder et al., 2020; Pufpaff et al., 2015). These practices involve specialized equipment and assistive technology (e.g., gastrostomy tubes, catheters, slider sheets, standers, high and low-tech communication devices, braillers, eye gaze devices, lifts), devices that these educators must

be knowledgeable about and adept in using (Reichle, 2011). Further, educators of students with ESN must employ myriad teaching strategies to meet their students' diverse communication, academic, behavioral, social, sensory, physical, health, and daily living skills, which often requires close physical proximity to students (e.g., hand-over-hand prompting, guiding, transferring; Browder et al., 2020; Tomaino et al., 2022).

Due to the substantial needs of students with ESN, the expertise that teachers of students with ESN use to meaningfully instruct and support students, and the importance of assistive technology and direct contact to provide necessary student support and engagement, it is understandable that teachers of students with ESN would experience increased levels of stress and professional dissatisfaction compared to other educators. In addition to diminished student outcomes, increased levels of stress and dissatisfaction has the potential to exacerbate teacher burnout and existing shortage of teachers of students with ESN (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Park & Shin, 2020). Without an exploration into the experiences and perspectives of teachers of students with ESN during the COVID-19 pandemic, school officials and policymakers miss an opportunity to learn from challenges to enhance teaching conditions and support mechanisms for teachers of students with ESN.

Further, education research during COVID has primarily focused on experiences during school closures in March of 2020. This narrow examination of the challenges faced by educators fails to document the comprehensive experiences of teachers as they transitioned from and back to in-person education between March and September of 2020 and paints an incomplete picture of how teachers traversed the immense task of relearning their profession twice over. This gross limitation of understanding limits opportunities for important systems change regarding shifting to online instruction—a circumstance that may occur again in the event of unforeseen circumstances such as: (a) resurgences of COVID-19 variants or other infectious diseases, (b) prolonged inclement weather, or (c) natural disasters (Hanreddy, 2022; Mark, 2022).

An examination of the holistic experiences of teachers with ESN is imperative to mitigating challenges to shifting models of instruction for students most vulnerable to skill regression and diminished health and wellness (Hanreddy, 2022). Moreover, lessons learned from this often-overlooked population of teachers may provide nuanced information applicable to all members of a school community, thereby strengthening school systems. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with ESN experienced at three points of time in 2020,

when: (a) schools closed in March, (b) during summer break, and (c) when schools reopened in September. Learning from challenges these teachers experienced can not only better prepare teachers to transition to and from online instruction, but can also inform the ways in which education decision-makers consider school system reform.

## Methods

This study followed an interpretative qualitative approach to understand the lived experience of teachers of students with ESN during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The research team consisted of four members: two White female faculty members in a university department of special education, and two White female graduate students studying special education in the same department. All team members had experience teaching students with ESN in public school systems and maintained a critical constructivist positionality regarding research and knowledge construction. The team obtained university Institutional Review Board approval prior to participant recruitment.

### Participants

We sought to recruit educators who: (a) taught students with ESN in a K–12 public school in March 2020 (the time in which recruitment occurred), (b) had experience in the transition from in-person to online instruction, and (c) agreed to engage in three video-recorded interviews for up to four hours across the three data collection periods within a six-month span. Approximately three weeks after school closures, the research team used convenience recruitment techniques (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), distributing emails to 14 teachers of students with ESN who they knew from previous teaching positions. These educators taught across seven schools in four districts located within a 20-mile radius of the university just outside of a major mid-Atlantic city. The team also sent recruitment emails to six school administrators within this region with whom they also held preexisting professional relationships, asking them to forward a recruitment message to teachers of students with ESN in their schools. Fourteen teachers emailed the primary investigator with an interest in participating, who then provided them with an online consent form and demographic questionnaire. Although all interested participants met inclusionary criteria (i.e., taught K–12 students with ESN in a public school in March 2020), only nine followed through with scheduling an interview. Table 1 provides demographic information for the nine participants, seven of whom at least one member of the research team knew.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Participant | Gender | Race/ Ethnicity | Years of Experience | Student Categories[b] | Grade |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | F | White | 6 | IDD, MD | 9th-12th |
| 2 | M | Hispanic | 3 | AUT, OHI | 7th-8th |
| 3 | F | Hispanic | 1 | IDD, AUT, PD, OHI | 9th-12th |
| 4 | F | White | 13 | IDD, MD, AUT, PD, OHI | 6th-8th |
| 5 | F | White | 4 | IDD, PD, IDS | 9th-12th |
| 6[a] | M | White | 2 | AUT, IDD | 3rd-6th |
| 7 | F | White | 5 | ID, AUT, OHI, SLD | 4th |
| 8 | F | White | 1 | AUT, IDD | K-3rd |
| 9 | F | White | 3 | PD, IDS, AUT, OHI | 9th-12th |

*Note*. [a]This participant left the teaching profession in summer of 2020. [b]As reported by participants. IDD: Intellectual and Developmental Disability, MD: Multiple Disability, AUT: Autism, IDS: Severe/Significant Intellectual Disability, PD: Physical Disability, OHI: Other Health Impairment.

## Data Collection

Each participant engaged in three rounds of interviews via Zoom occurring between (a) March and April of 2020—just as school closed, (b) June and July of 2020—during summer school/summer vacation, and (c) September and October of 2020—once schools reopened. Two members of the research team cofacilitated each interview. Team members debriefed after each interview, discussing field notes and memos and noting emerging themes. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and lasted approximately 25–60 minutes each.

For round one interviews, the team used a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about participant experiences transitioning to online instruction (e.g., What does a typical work day look like for you right now? What is the current state of IEPs and other special education meetings?). Once round one data were collected, the research team engaged in initial open coding to inform the development of the interview protocol for round two. Protocol questions for round two targeted the evolution of online instruction and expectations for the start of the new academic year (e.g., What are your school or district's expectations or guidance for the

fall semester? Envision walking into your classroom in the fall; what do you need to feel prepared and make the fall successful?). The research team again used open coding procedures to inform the development of the round three interview protocol, which focused on participants' experiences returning to school, teaching strategies, "lessons learned," and recommendations for teachers and school leadership (e.g., Can you share a particularly successful lesson or instructional activity? How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the future of the teaching profession?). During round three, one participant left the profession due to a reported lack of support and satisfaction with the education system. This participant, however, still engaged in an interview, reflecting on his experiences.

## Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently and iteratively throughout the study. The researchers used Otter.ai to transcribe interview recordings and cleaned/deidentified all transcripts prior to analysis. For round one interviews, each researcher engaged in initial open coding by independently reading the same transcript to identify initial keywords, reoccurring content, and significant statements (Moustakas, 1994). The team then met to compare their interpretations of the data and developed an initial codebook based on key terms, overarching concepts, and related concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The team used this initial codebook to code a round one second transcript before meeting again to refine existing codes, identify new codes, or determine irrelevant codes. The team followed the coding process of independently reading the same transcript and convening to refine the codebook for each round one interview, which resulted in an initial codebook for the study that consisted of 31 highly stable codes. The research team used the same three-stage process of (a) cleaning, (b) independently coding transcripts using the most recent iteration of the codebook, and (c) collaborating to revise the codebook until no new codes emerged for round two interviews. During this time, the team engaged in ongoing conversations to resolve discrepancies in coding. For example, the team shifted the codes "inconsistency," "uncertainty," and "stress" to create a new code of "negative emotions" to address inconsistent coding. This process resulted in a codebook consisting of 16 richly defined codes and a final codebook consisting of eight highly stable categories after round three. Finally, the research team recoded all rounds of transcripts using the finalized, eight-category codebook. Once all data were coded, the researchers summarized key themes into preliminary findings.

### Trustworthiness

The research team took several measures to ensure trustworthiness (e.g., the degree to which researcher interpretations of data accurately reflect the meaning and intent of participants; Pilot & Beck, 2014). First, the researchers cofacilitated all interviews, with the primary facilitator asking protocol questions and the secondary facilitator recording robust field notes, including key concepts and participant reactions during the conversation. Second, the secondary facilitator conducted member checks with participants immediately after interviews by using field notes to review key ideas and interpretations and asking participants to react, correct, add, or expand on the information presented. Third, after interviews, the cofacilitators memoed their immediate thoughts, reactions, and interpretations and debriefed with one another to discuss and reflect on their memos and why they arrived at initial their interpretations. Fourth, before interview rounds two and three, the researchers reviewed key information from previous interviews with participants to establish a starting point for subsequent interview discussions (e.g., "When we left off four weeks ago…") and gain participant feedback on initial analysis and emerging codes (e.g., "Last time we spoke, support from families was very important to you…") to obtain additional participant feedback on researcher interpretations of data. During this time participants corrected information (e.g., districts shifted the phrase "distance IEP" to "temporary IEP" between rounds of interviews) but more often expanded on information by providing additional examples or transitioning to a new, related story. Fifth, the researchers cleaned all transcripts to (a) deidentify the data, (b) ensure accuracy, (c) add important contextual information (e.g., sighs, gestures, sarcasm) and to become more familiar with data to facilitate the analysis process. Sixth, the team reached 100% agreement across researchers for categories and codes in the finalized codebook.

## Findings

During interview rounds one and two, participants primarily described challenges they faced when transitioning to online instruction and back, including: (a) failing to equip students with technology skills, (b) difficulty adapting instructional techniques, (c) inability to access student materials and resources, (d) discomfort with temporary IEPs, and (e) dependency on families "acting as paraprofessionals." Further, participants described safety and logistical barriers they experienced returning to school during

the pandemic during round three interviews. Within each barrier described, however, participants often provided recommendations or offered solutions to "take a step back" after the "chaos" that COVID-19 wreaked to "reexamine special education services." As one participant noted, "I think if people could look at that [educational disruption] as a way to open that [special education shortcomings] up. Maybe it's going to be an opening of a door instead of a closing of a door."

### Failing to Equip Students with Technology Skills

Participants regretfully disclosed failing to prepare their students to use technology "period," thereby increasing parent and student frustration and limiting student learning and social engagement when school moved online. Some participants indicated that this, in part, was due to student behaviors impeding their ability to keep technology in the classroom:

> In my room we had a situation where we couldn't have any computers in our room because one of my kids is a destroyer. So we never did anything on the computers. And we have a kid who's obsessed with wires so we can't have any wires.

Far more participants, however, begrudgingly admitted that they maintained low expectations for their students to use technology "due to the severity of their disabilities." Likewise, participants reported that school administrators also maintained low expectations for students with ESN to use technology, as technological "resources aren't necessarily available" in their segregated special education classrooms: "I don't want to sound bitter or anything, but I feel like in technology, [special education] gets the 'remains' sometimes." The technology that was available to participants "was crappy, very outdated technology…so, I just didn't use it."

As a result, participants uniformly recommended that teachers of students with ESN use technology in face-to-face instruction in schools, develop students' technology skills early: "start of the beginning of the year" and "set expectations" for students to "turn on the computer, log on to [school-based learning programs]," "access links," and "troubleshoot a computer." Unsurprisingly, participants noted that, without administrators acknowledging their biases and addressing "disparities" in resources between students with ESN and their peers, this was an unattainable goal: "this [technology access] is more than—[long pause]—this is an equity issue."

### Difficulty Adapting Instructional Techniques

Participants were challenged by (and often unable to meet) the extensive needs of their students online, including: (a) students with medical

conditions or sensory needs ("disorders like seizure disorders and vision disorders where we're asking to limit their screen time and someone who needs everything displayed so big—we can only present so big in our [online platform])," (b) students who required significant physical support (e.g., "two of my kids have OT [occupational therapy], like *significant* OT"), (c) students with "self-injurious behaviors…turning aggression onto the family, onto the device," and/or (d) students with significant cognitive support needs (e.g., "she's not receptive or expressive; she doesn't count… fields of four for her are even sometimes too much").

Participants indicated that school administrators failed to support them in providing effective instruction in online and in-person instruction by not "taking [students with ESN] into account" in school initiatives, despite "talking about equity for how many years now." For instance, many participants recounted receiving placating comments such as "Do the best you can" and "Well, it's going to look really different for your kids, and you're just going to have to be flexible" from school administrators during online instruction instead of guidance and support. Further, district administrators mailed weekly paper "learning packets" to student homes that included grade-level worksheets for students. Participants lamented that the packets were not adapted for the needs of students with disabilities—much less students with ESN—again leaving participants and their students overlooked and underresourced: "We got the worst end of it [online instruction], and it sucks."

Further, based on the "amazing progress" students made online after they "stopped trying to push into regular classes" (supporting their students to participate in general education instruction) and, instead, focused on "one-to-one time" or working in "small groups," several participants began to question if inclusion was truly best practice for teaching students academic skills or if "we've done [inclusion] to just make ourselves feel good." For example, one participation spoke about inclusion specific to online instruction:

> In terms of virtually…man, this is going to sound bad, but maybe inclusion isn't the best. Yeah, in the classroom, they get to practice more social norms, etcetera, or learn social expectations. But virtually, I don't think it's the best…even if it were causing more work for me, I don't care.

Other participants extended this line of questioning to in-person instruction, such as one participant indicating that teachers of students with ESN "really have to ask ourselves, is everything we're doing [inclusion] the right choice for the student?"

Participants agreed that administrators should seek to learn from the experiences of teachers of students with ESN to understand what "learning" is "appropriate" for students with ESN in online spaces. Participants further recommended that administrators support teachers of students with ESN in logistical matters by proactively providing teachers with: (a) "adapted curriculum" that can be used in the classroom as well as online, (b) professional development "to create engagement in an online classroom," (c) "examples of lesson plans" appropriate for teachers of students with ESN, and (d) personal computers or tablets for each student "loaded with some sites that the students use in the classroom so that it would be easier for the parents to help them [at home]." Moreover, "given the physical challenges of [technology] access" among many of their students, participants recommended administrators "purchase supplies" such as basic adapted technology (e.g., switches, keyguards, "manipulatives," "physical things") "to send home with students during closures." "Then we know exactly what they have [at home]…so then we know how to create a lesson based on it."

### Inability to Access Student Materials and Resources

The "biggest worry" among most participants was how the "last-minute" nature of school closures impacted student access to critical "personal equipment and belongings" that were left at school. For example, participants described the emotional distress (distress that led to aggressive or self-injurious behaviors among some students) that the absence of favored sensory tools, comfort items, and materials that students used to navigate their daily routines (e.g., visual schedules, reinforcement schedules) had on students at home. Additionally, student assistive technology such as standers, positioning tools, communication devices, and chargers for devices were also left at school, leaving students in adverse circumstances ("They don't have their systems. They can't communicate."). Several participants, however, were "really kept up at night" by the Medicaid-funded materials such "G-tube replacements" and toileting materials that were left at school:

> It's usually every three months they get their diapers, so that's like, "Oh, two packs get to go to school because you're there. One or two packs stay here [at home]." That was the thing that I was like *this* is imperative. They need this. I don't care if I go into school in a bubble suit and get them what they need.

In addition, nearly all participants' students experienced food insecurity, with many students largely dependent on school-provided meals for consistent nutrition. As a result, several participants reported "literally

knock[ing] on [a student's] door" to do wellness checks or dropping off food or other items they purchased for the student and their family (e.g., toys, sanitary materials, learning manipulates).

### Discomfort With Temporary IEPs

Participants indicated that special education services as written on students' annual IEPs "totally stopped" when schools closed during the pandemic (e.g., "We're absolutely not in compliance [with IDEA], but we're not trying to pretend we are either"). During round two interviews participants discussed the temporary IEPs created by their districts for participants to use in lieu of students' annual IEPs during school closures. The temporary IEPs ultimately reduced the amount of special education services included on students' annual IEPs, which participants perceived as "pointless" because the temporary IEPs still overstated the amount of services students received (e.g., "My kids aren't getting OT [occupational therapy], they're not getting PST [physical and speech therapy], so they're regressing"). Further, participants found the temporary IEPs burdensome to write and lamented that they would have to "redo everything [IEPs] again" once school reopened. In short, participants believed that temporary IEPs were designed by administrators as a "CYA [cover your ass]" measure to prevent parents from filing complaints for out-of-compliance annual IEPs, evaluations, and eligibility meetings. Moreover, participants felt "at-risk" for "legal action" from parents, believing that school administrators would not assume responsibility for IEP issues and would redirect frustrated/angry parents back to teachers.

Moreover, participants were required to host IEP team meetings to finalize temporary IEPs. Some districts required participants to host temporary IEP meetings by phone, which significantly compromised participants' ability to communicate effectively with team members. During phone meetings participants found it difficult to facilitate conversations, with many people "talking all over each other." Teleconferences also made it impossible to read body language and use visuals to help convey information. These communication barriers were especially true when meeting with families who did not speak English as their first language. As one Spanish-speaking participant noted:

> We had the issue where they [school administrators] didn't want to do IEPs through Zoom or through Blackboard. It was all the phone call, and you know, there's a lot of language barriers—accents, things like that. I mean, you can read people's lips [if you can see them], but it [not having any visual] was a nightmare.

On the other hand, participants who engaged in video conference IEP meetings though an online platform such as Zoom or Google Meet described: (a) greater instances of shared decision-making among team members, (b) increased student and family engagement and comfort (e.g., asking questions, sharing family stories and photos, "chit-chatting"), (c) enhanced discussion about student data through interactive screen sharing, and (d) families inviting extended family members to their child's meeting (e.g., other family members, in-home professionals, bilingual friends and family members to support interpretation) who provided important perspectives and information. In fact, participants found that video conference IEPs were substantially more meaningful than in-person meetings held at schools before COVID shutdowns. Consequently, participants recommended that districts consider continuing the option of video conferencing for meetings with families.

### Dependency on Families "Acting as a Paraprofessional"

Participants uniformly sympathized with the stress that families experienced during school closures, recognizing the numerous responsibilities they shouldered during stay-at-home orders, including the critical role they assumed providing continuous support to their children with ESN. As one participant noted, "They have to deal with their kid having a meltdown. [Parents] have other kids. All of the students have siblings. And [parents] are working from home. How do you work in business if you have to sit with your kid at a computer screen?" Unfortunately, however, participants uniformly agreed that, without families "acting as a paraprofessional," online education "would not happen." Participants "kind of tag-team[ed]" with families (e.g., parents, older siblings, grandparents) who helped students log into classes, reinforced instructions and prompted students to respond, assumed the role of related service providers (e.g., doing core-strengthening exercises with guidance), and even took data for temporary IEPs.

Given the degree to which participants needed families to serve as "instructional assistants," they spent considerable time teaching family members to effectively: (a) prompt students; (b) provide basic occupational, physical, and speech/language therapy; and (c) prevent or address challenging or dangerous behaviors. In addition, participants collaborated with families to utilize items from around their homes (e.g., pillows and towels for positioning, index cards for communication tools, Velcro and rice for sensory tools), often without the support of related service providers because they "were nearly nonexistent" (i.e., did not "show up") during online instruction.

In addition to teaching families instructional strategies, participants also spent considerable time teaching many caregivers how to access technology to support their child with ESN: "I made assumptions that some of the parents were able to use…the technology…but I really wish that I had set up a [technology] training with the parents." Participants recommended that school administrators create "ongoing, maybe once a month" workshops in "computer education" for families of students with ESN to prepare them to utilize technology for their students at home in the event of school closures and in support of at-home learning. In this vein, participants highlighted the need to offer education and support geared to the needs of different family populations, such as students who use differing assistive technology or "Latino parents because most of these students, if they can't read…if the parent can't use the email or doesn't have an email" they are unable to effectively support their children.

### Safety and Logistical Barriers Returning to School

While returning to school was something all participants desired, during round three interviews participants described fearing for their safety and the safety of their students at school. Participant schools reopened incrementally to reduce the likelihood of COVID transmissions, with students with ESN being the first to attend. Because participants were among the first "wave" of teachers reentering schools, they were faced with gross uncertainty regarding how to manage CDC mandates (e.g., social distancing, masks) while also providing effective instruction. For instance, participants lamented that they did not have guidance or support on how to set up their classrooms in accordance with the minimum six-feet social distancing guidelines, which was made more challenging by the need to make small classrooms accessible for students who use large assistive technology devices (e.g., wheelchairs, adapted desks).

Participants also described hardships associated with desensitizing students to washing hands/using hand sanitizer and wearing CDC-mandated masks. One participant felt particularly distressed "forcing" students with severe, complex physical and communication disabilities who "don't have physical voluntary movement" to wear masks because these students would not be able to consent or remove masks without assistance. At the same time, participants' schools experienced personal protective gear shortages (e.g., masks, gloves, disposable gowns, face shields, hand and surface sanitizer), putting participants and students at risk for contracting and spreading COVID-19. This was especially relevant to participants, as they engaged in frequent, direct contact with their students (e.g., toiling, sanitary changing, feeding).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of students with ESN experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a considerable amount of research has investigated the state of education during COVID-19 school closures, such research failed to consider the perspectives of teachers of students with ESN, a population of educators that often rely on hands-on, direct instruction to effectively teach their students. This study also uniquely documented the experiences of participants throughout three distinct stages of school closures during the pandemic. In addition, while educational research often focuses on barriers experienced, participants in this study also offered recommendations for preventing or addressing barriers.

Like other research examining special education during COVID, participants described challenges in meeting the needs of their students online, including adapting their instruction to online learning environments (Long et al., 2021; McDevitt & Mello, 2021). The focus shifted when conducting round two interviews, however, to the degree to which participants perceived their students as utterly disregarded, as evident by the absence of technology for their students and dearth of instructional, technological, logistical, safety, and legal support from administrators. In fact, participants indicated that a paucity of administrative support was the crux of educational inequity, as well the gateway to a just education for students with ESN. It was apparent that participants did not feel respected by school administration and did not trust (or even expect) administrators to come to their aid in the event of confrontations with families or in the face of adversity. Unfortunately, this finding reflects robust research on limited administrative proficiency in supporting special educators (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

In addition, participants pointed to the power that low expectations for students with ESN among administrators had on inequitable education. Participant observations of the influence of administrator expectations reflects literature documenting how administrator expectations impact the degree to which students with ESN experience meaningful inclusion, access to adapted general curriculum, and effective instructional practices (Agran et al., 2020; de Apodaca et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2018). As participants explored their interactions with administrators throughout rounds of interviews, the negative impact of low administrative expectations for students with ESN on participant expectations became crystalized. For example, it was not until schools closed that participants realized how grossly

unprepared their students were for engaging with basic technology and made the uncomfortable connection between their own low expectations for technology use and student opportunities to learn technology skills. Participants then traced—not blamed—the cycle of low administrative expectations influencing student access (in this example, access to technology and expectations for participants to teach technology skills) to their own low expectations for students to build technology skills (without them realizing it before). In summary, what this study points to is the cyclical nature of how one person's expectations (and behavior that occurs as a result of these expectations) constructs another's expectations (Archambault et al., 2012; Rubie-Davies, 2006), as well as the need to "break the cycle" of low expectations to support student outcomes (Gross et al., 2015).

The importance of family–professional partnerships is not a new theme in special education literature. In fact, family–professional collaboration is called for in federal special and general education law and is found to benefit students, families, and teachers alike (Kyzar et al., 2019). Although several studies conducted during COVID reinforced the important parental role in supporting the education of the children at home (Liu et al., 2020; Rousoulioti et al., 2022), this study documented how the ability for participants to instruct their students squarely fell on the shoulders of families. This finding reinforces the importance of developing collaborative relationships with families, including engaging in ongoing, two-way conversations about student and family needs, strengths, and goals (Turnbull et al., 2022). Doing so could enhance more comprehensive IEPs and family quality of life through the creation of goals important for all aspects of students' lives as well as the ability of teachers to meet the needs of families in collaboration with other school professionals and community organizations (e.g., food insecurity, access to the internet, need for additional sanitary items).

In addition, family expectations are among the most powerful influencers on student outcomes (Southward & Kyzar, 2017). Family–teacher collaboration also has the potential to bidirectionally affect expectations for students, which reinforces the need for high expectations from school leadership to create a positive "trickle down" effect. Moreover, participants' glimpse into the lives of families during online instruction not only amplified participants' empathy and commitment to family support (e.g., addressing food insecurity), but also reinforced the need for appropriate levels of support for families with members with ESN (e.g., support with student "meltdowns," toileting, navigating devices). Likewise, online IEP meetings created a portal into positive family dynamics and functioning, including meeting extended family members and hearing family stories. In

addition to informing student IEPs and understanding family needs, interacting with families virtually through online platforms has the potential for educators to build upon families' cultural wealth to enhance instruction and student support (Yosso, 2005; Delouche et al., 2024).

Finally, participants discussed the ways in which they questioned the "inclusion" of students with ESN in their schools. The core sentiment underpinning discussions revolved around whether inclusion was best for their students or simply something education decision-makers perceived as best for them. Research documents numerous benefits associated with inclusion of students with ESN, including gains in academics, social opportunities, communication, and self-determination (Kurth et al., 2015). The ways in which participants described their implementation of inclusion (e.g., providing support to students with ESN within general education settings, but completely separate from their peers without ESN), however, did not reflect best practices (e.g., learning alongside their peers without disabilities across education and community settings). Several factors must be in place for meaningful inclusion to occur, including a school community that supports inclusion and collaboration among all school professionals (Francis et al., 2016)—key factors that participants did not experience. This finding again denotes a need for administrative leadership that sets expectations for research-based inclusive practices within the school community.

## Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this study. First, although convenience recruitment strategies are common in qualitative research, this approach can result in narrowed or biased perspectives (Yin, 2016). In this study, the recruitment process only allowed perspectives of teachers from a small geographic location. Further, although qualitative research is not intended to be generalized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), the participants included in this study were also relatively homogeneous (e.g., majority female, one school district, similar years' teaching experience). In the same vein, although the researchers sought to diversify the perspectives and experiences of participants by recruiting via school administration, this process resulted in an inability to determine if and to whom invitations were distributed. Finally, at least one member of the research team knew seven of the nine participants. Although these existing relationships appeared to facilitate comfortable conversations, it is possible that the relationships may have negatively impacted discussions (e.g., acquiescence). The research team took turns facilitating across rounds of interviews in an effort to provide participants opportunities to speak as openly as possible.

## Implications

School professionals and policymakers may draw several implications from this study. First, it is essential that administrators maintain high expectations for all students, continuously seek to grow their capacity to provide an appropriate education for students with ESN, and create a school culture dedicated to inclusion. For example, administrators can embed universal design for learning when purchasing technology and developing schoolwide materials. Moreover, all professionals within a school (e.g., general and special educators, related service providers, counselors, custodians) must be committed to equitable education for inclusion to occur. As a result, administrators should consider multiple mechanisms such as distributed leadership, ongoing professional development, continued guidance and support for teachers, and accountability measures for equitable teaching practices (Rigby et al., 2020; Tudryn, 2016; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Unfortunately, research reports limited administrative proficiency in supporting special educators and inclusive practices (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Due to the limited knowledge in supporting special education teachers (especially teachers of students with ESN), there is a significant need for higher education preparation programs to equip administrators with the expectations and skills necessary to establish and maintain a school community that values and supports all students and their families. Further, higher education programs may mitigate low expectations for students with ESN by teaching administrators how to critically examine their biases and assumptions through reflexivity practices (interrogating one's thoughts, biases, habits, and assumptions, including how they were formed and how they influence interactions with others; D'Cruz et al., 2007); skills that administrators can then build into the school community. For example, administrators may facilitate a professional development program on reflexivity processes such as the EASE Process, with individuals examining their identities, becoming aware of how their identities makes them feel and act in certain contexts, engaging in self-scrutiny about their actions, and evaluating the impact of their emotions and beliefs on how they act (Francis et al., 2023). According to participant data (including the participant who left the profession due to dissatisfaction with the education system), administrators who embody these skills and practices will not only enhance student outcomes, but may well retrain highly qualified teachers of students with ESN by helping them feel valued and gratified in their profession.

Future research should seek to address the limitations in this study by investigating the perspectives and experiences of more diverse teachers across the U.S., as well as the experiences of students and families, to more deeply understand how to optimize instruction and support for students with ESN. Further, it is critical to understand the experiences of administrators, including their perspectives of teachers of and students with ESN to determine how their perspectives deviate or coalesce with participants' perspectives in order to establish a foundation for advancing appropriate education for students with ESN. Future researchers should also continue to advance curriculum and instruction for students with ESN, including methods for increasing technology literacy among students with ESN. In addition, it likely goes without saying that future research must also investigate best practices for online teaching strategies and programs to advance educational equity for this population. For technology literacy and access to online education to occur, however, students with ESN must have access to up-to-date, adapted technology within their schools and homes. As a result, it is essential that researchers continue to critically interrogate disparities in education to elucidate necessary systems change. Moreover, future research should investigate the nature and efficacy of online IEP meetings in enhancing family–professional partnerships and, ultimately, student outcomes.

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Grace L. Francis is an associate professor of special education at George Mason University. Her research interests include the influence of expectations on the transition to adulthood and family support policies and practices that result in a high quality of life for individuals with extensive support needs. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. G. L. Francis, George Mason University, Fairfax Campus, Finley Building 218, 4400 University Dr., MS 1F2, Fairfax, VA 22030, or email gfranci4@gmu.edu

Alexandra S. Reed is the academic coordinator for the Mason LIFE program at George Mason University. Her research interests include enhancing inclusive, meaningful postsecondary education for students with intellectual disability and countering epistemicide through participatory action research with individuals with intellectual disability.

Kelly Conn-Reda is a Ph.D. student at George Mason University and a special education administrator in a large suburban school district in northern Virginia. Her research interests include effective school- and community-based interventions for special education youth with complex needs.