

# Special Education in Pandemic Times: Parental Perspectives of the Virtual Teaching-& Learning Process

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## **Abstract**

*Covid-19 wreaked havoc on the U.S. educational system during the 2020 spring semester. Schools were closed, teachers and students had to learn and navigate a new system of virtual learning; and parents were suddenly primary facilitators in the teaching-and-learning process. All teachers worked to create a milieu for learning in which they motivated students, met state standards, and taught students to navigate virtual learning platforms. However, special education (SPED) teachers had the increased responsibility of meeting all the requirements delineated in each students' individualized education plan (i.e., goals, objectives/benchmarks, accommodations, etc.). This article provides findings from a quasi-qualitative study regarding parental perspectives of how SPED services were provided to their children during this critical time. Interview responses were categorized, triangulated, and summarized into three primary themes. Further, their answers rendered three recommendations for future research.*

**Keywords:** *Accommodations & Modifications; Covid-19, Distance Education; Online & Virtual Learning; Parental Participation; Quasi-Qualitative Study; Special Education*

**D**uring the early months of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic sparked an international crisis that eventually equated to substantial disruptions to day-to-day normalcy. People were no longer allowed to congregate in large groups, business and commerce were only allowed to operate based on essential worker status; gathering sizes were limited; and social distancing of up to six feet was required for all federal, state, and local organizations (public & private). Further, places of worship (i.e., churches, synagogues, etc.) were closed; weddings, funerals, and other similar functions were limited to a finite number of guests (varied by state ordinance); and the vast majority of all non-professional athletic competitions were canceled.

By early spring, the Federal Government and U.S. Department of Education, issued one of the most significant mandates for school districts to cease traditional face-to-face classroom instruction and employ a myriad of different distance education and virtual learning platform models (i.e., online, work packets, video based instruction, etc.). This fundamental shift drastically changed contemporary American public education and forced educators into a trial-and-error approach to providing instruction “virtually” in meaningful ways.

All efforts were focused to help ensure the health and safety of our Nation's students, teachers, staff, and administrators while simultaneously trying to provide seamless instruction. Although there were proponents who strongly supported their teachers and local districts, the swift

transition was met with considerable challenges and left potentially huge gaps in the teaching-and-learning process. This was clearly evident based on the copious number of news stories, editorials, blogs, and endless stream of social media posts consisting of individuals criticizing having to teach their children from home.

Unfortunately despite best intentions, students with disabilities who received special education (SPED) services were arguably the most neglected. The effects of Covid-19 on students with disabilities has been so deleterious that legislation was just passed to provide \$2.6 billion for state SPED grants under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004); in addition to the \$12.9 billion already provided (Nelson & Murakami, 2020; Zirkel, 2020).

The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of a quasi-qualitative study. The study focused on interviewing seven parents of children with disabilities and evaluated their perceptions (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) regarding the positive and negative impact to the abrupt disruption of both general and SPED services they were receiving due to Covid-19 in the spring of 2020 and continuation of changes for the 2020-2021 academic school year. The parents provided rich narratives through the lens of (a) anecdotal stories, (b) specific situations, and (c) their direct involvement in the teaching-and-learning process. The following section serves as a review of the literature.

## **Literature Review**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) 14% (7.1 million) of all public school students received SPED services under IDEIA (2004) during the 2018-2019 academic school year. Given we are living in an era of the new normal has presented many challenges for K-12 general and special educators as they transitioned face-to-face content to 100% online. Never before in our Nation's history have inservice educators faced the challenge of delivering content in such an expedient and divergent method of instruction. Although this conundrum was disruptive to all students, it exacerbated issues of access, equity, and inclusion for students with disabilities (Nelson & Murakami, 2020; Young & Donovan, 2020).

Although age of eligibility varies from state-to-state, once identified, IDEIA (2004) requires all students with disabilities—from kindergarten-to-twelfth grade—who qualify for SPED services to be placed on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a legally binding document (i.e., contract) between parent(s) of children with disabilities and the school district. According to Arnett et al. (2021) the IEP should include present level of educational performance, goals and objectives/benchmarks, modifications, accommodations, and related services (e.g., counseling, physical or occupational therapy, transportation, etc.). Further, times in the least restrictive environment, are specified which must be followed. However, given the significant number of school districts across the country drastically changed during the spring of 2020, due to Covid-19, providing SPED services and adhering to the provisions within each student's IEP was negatively impacted.

Additionally the IEP delineates accommodations and modifications to be provided in the classroom so the student can meet rigorous curriculum standards. Examples of accommodations and modifications include but are not limited to extra time on assignments and/or tests, use of calculator or spell checkers, additional materials (e.g., manipulatives), reduction of homework assignments, and type of instruction (e.g., small vs. large group) (Couvillon et al., 2018; Zirkel, 2020).

At the forefront of parents' minds was the expedited transition from face-to-face to home based instruction because this raised major concerns regarding complying with IDEIA (2004),

adhering to the IEP, and equity of outcomes for students with disabilities (Nelson, 2020). For example, students who required help with self-regulation, physical cues (Nelson & Murakami, 2020; Young & Donovan, 2020), and routine experienced a significant disruption in the teaching-and-learning process. The most obvious need for students with IEPs, is individualized instruction. This one-on-one, or small group instruction was virtually impossible to provide in an online environment; even if someone—typically untrained—was at home working with the student.

With the spread of Covid-19, educators from across the globe were forced to change their modality of instruction. Given students could no longer attend school, districts mandated teachers transition course content from traditional face-to-face to various distant education formats, primarily virtual instruction. Virtual learning, also coined online learning, is a broad term in which instruction and content are delivered on the Internet. (Young & Donovan, 2021, Nelson & Murakami, 2020, Greer et al., 2015). Although there was a wide variance in delivery models, schools typically utilized teacher created work packets, learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, etc.), web-based and video applications (e.g., ZOOM, TEAMS, etc.), and prefabricated curriculum as the primary means for the teaching-and-learning process (Nelson & Murakami, 2020; Young & Donovan, 2020).

The ambiguity of directives, restrictions, and other issues associated with Covid-19, left district administrators in a precarious and underprepared position. Ideally educators should be dedicated to improving their instruction on a daily basis (see Fitzpatrick, 2010), yet, virtually overnight, they were informed schools were ultimately going to close. According to Sahin and Shelly (2020) this decision created a sense of frustration and anxiety for educators who were significantly untrained to translate their curriculum to a different format.

From the onset of the pandemic, very few educators felt prepared to teach via distance education, however, they were expected to create work packets, online lessons, identify best practices for synchronous and asynchronous learning, and know which to employ. They were also charged with teaching students how to complete and submit the work packets, use the learning management system, while simultaneously engaging them through these new mediums. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, educators had to learn how to assess students differently (Jameson et al., 2021; Sahin & Shelly, 2020; Young & Donovan, 2020).

According to Sahin and Shelly (2020) good virtual instructional methods are necessary for online learning to take place and similar approaches that work in a face-to-face classroom are often effective in the online environment. Specifically for students with disabilities, Young and Donovan (2021) averred that student success is less reliant on the disability than it is on the educational teams' approach. Therefore, it is vital teacher's first plan for face-to-face classes, and then make the necessary modifications to help maximize student learning outcomes in virtual learning environments. Nelson and Murakami (2020) reiterated that the delivery platform and teacher skill set greatly affects student learning.

In many instances, schools employed a co-teaching model in which the general and SPED educator collaboratively teach each lesson. In a study by Gokbulut et al., (2020) students with and without disabilities who participated in co-taught classes were asked if they enjoyed having two teachers; over 90% of both groups of students said yes. Over 98% of both groups of students felt relaxed in a class with two teachers, and a similar percentage felt they were successful in this class. When the parents of these students were presented questions, 100% had positive perceptions of co-taught classes. Further paraprofessionals are often used to help facilitate and augment instruction, manage behavior, and assist students stay on task. However, once schools closed, students

with disabilities were expected to be fairly autonomous—with some support from parents and/or guardians—and be agents of their own learning.

Typically, in the traditional classroom and school setting, educators observed a student struggling, or watched to see if they understood a concept, theory, or process (Young & Donovan, 2020). Online learning made this a more arduous task, and allowed the student to miss out on concepts required to learn prerequisite skills before moving to the next. For example, a first grade teacher had difficulties teaching a student to read or work with manipulatives when they were not able to give them the full attention they required. Similarly high school teachers experienced difficulties teaching students who had varying degrees of engagement. Gulya and Fehervari (2020) suggested students with disabilities may not have the same interest, confidence, or study habits when doing virtual school; thus hindering their learning.

These were all very real and documented issues, yet they failed to account for students with disabilities and how educators met the goals and objectives/benchmarks identified in their IEP. Both distance education and hybrid learning modalities significantly impeded the “natural” face-to-face school day, leaving students with disabilities requiring help to sustain their efforts to complete their daily work. Further, Mitchell (2021) noted that teachers were fairly unsuccessful in guiding and encouraging students to persist to complete assignments because of the nature of virtual learning. Greer et al. (2015) lamented that online learning was difficult for students with disabilities.

Based on the dearth of literature, the researchers designed a study to begin filling the significant void of information regarding parental perspectives of the educational experiences of students with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following section provides a summary of the research methods used in this study.

## **Research Methods**

In compliance with the U.S. Food & Drug Administration standards for protection of human subjects of research, the principal investigator submitted a proposal to conduct this study to the Internal Review Board at a Tier-I research institution. The Board approved the proposal and verified that (a) appropriate research protocols were employed and (b) the rights and welfare of human subjects were safe.

The researchers used qualitative methods (see Braun & Clark, 2006) and developed 11 multipronged open-ended interview questions. The 11 multi-pronged, open-ended questions allowed parents the opportunity to provide perspectives of their child’s educational journey from the spring of 2020 until the spring of 2021. These questions were designed to gain specific knowledge of what took place during the educational process rather than generalities (see Steiner, 1996). Further, the researchers allowed each parent to express their thoughts about strengths, weaknesses, and concerns to gain deeper insights into their experiences.

The particulars of each case study were examined individually and then the commonalities (i.e., themes) were identified. These commonalities became apparent through studying the collected data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Stake, 1994). Each interview was coded using thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) asserted that thematic analysis provides detailed and meaningful data for qualitative research through forming a list of ideas while transcribing data, coding and collating data, turning codes into initial themes, creating a thematic map of the data as themes were reviewed and refined. Through careful analysis of the seven interviews, common themes of successes, frustrations, and hardships were revealed. As the researchers identified commonalities across cases,

they categorized them according to strategies and actions that could promote student success in the future event of distance education. Process and procedures for data collection are outlined in Table I.

**Table I: *Process & Procedures***

Process:	Procedures:
Contact	The researchers contacted & set up interview appointments with each participant. All interviews were scheduled for approximately 30 minutes.
Interview	The researchers sent each participant the study summary & consent form via email prior to the interview. Each participant read the study summary & signed the informed consent form. The researchers audio-recorded each interview & additional notes were taken during the interview. The researchers asked <i>all</i> participants a set of 11 multi-pronged open-ended interview questions.
Post-Interview Procedure & Data Analysis	All interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. Procedures in the collection and managing of data for this study were handled in an effort to maintain a high level of confidentiality for all participants. The primary researcher transcribed the interviews & provided pseudonyms for all participants. All hand written notes remained in a locked file cabinet until transferred to electronic format. Data analysis took place once all interviews were completed & transcribed. The data collected through interviews were coded using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clark, 2006).
Final Results	All transcribed data was safely stored in password protected electronic format by the primary researcher. Participants were asked to conduct a check of final data to help with triangulation. Participants will be given information & access to the final research presentation/paper for their personal knowledge.

## Demographics

This study consisted of seven parents of eight students with disabilities primarily from an under resourced rural school district. To help ensure anonymity, the majority of the participants resided in a rural Mid-Atlantic state. Although the sample size was relatively small, this was a function of parents who were asked to participate but did not want to meet face-to-face and were

unwilling to discuss their perspectives of their child’s educational performance with the primary researcher via a conference call. The small number of cases is typical of qualitative studies and if the researchers’ goals are generation, refinement, comparison, and validation of constructs, which they are, the study does not need to be replicated to claim reliability (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993).

Based on the small sample size, centralized geographic location, and most importantly to help ensure confidentiality the researchers decided not to include specific identifiable demographic information (i.e., age, grade level, disabilities, etc.). Rather, they decided to leave in gender and grade level to provide a context for the narrative. The age range for the students was from 9-to-19 and disabilities primarily consisted of students on the autism spectrum, intellectual disabilities, and physical and other health impairments (see Table II).

**Table II: *Student Demographics***

Parent Pseudonym	Child Pseudonym	Gender	Grade Level
Tonya	Connor	Male	Elementary School
Amy	Jason	Male	Elementary School
Hillary	James	Male	Elementary School
Sam	Stan	Male	Middle School
Lisa	Trent	Male	High School
Karen	Sandy	Female	High School
Sam	Kristy	Female	High School
Derek	Gary	Male	High School

Every effort was made to bracket (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) or suspend the primary investigator's preconceptions of what the strengths and weaknesses of virtual learning were and how Covid-19 affected these students with disabilities. The primary investigator got to know the educational history and stories behind each child having an IEP, often learning how parents felt about the process, as she established rapport before asking the interview questions that led to the following findings.

## **Findings**

As noted above, all interviews were transcribed, coded, and triangulated. The researchers conducted a systematic thematic analysis and identified the following three major themes (a) active participation, (b) communication, and (c) grievances with two subthemes (i.e. regression & routines) which are discussed below.

### ***Active Participation***

Although the transition from face-to-face to 100% online instruction was intended to maintain the integrity of educational services for the remainder of the school year, there was an overwhelming consensus among participants who stated the 2019-2020 academic school year actually ended in March when schools shut their doors. Six of the seven participants were from significantly under resourced rural communities, of which, five of the parents interviewed knew of families who did not have access to technology and expressed grave concern regarding the potentially devastating impact it had on these children, especially if they had a disability.

However, unlike these families, a consistently repeated theme was that their child made it through the tumultuous year because they had parental support, funds to hire tutors, or knew someone who could help throughout the school day. Five parents stated they did not believe any substantive progress was made towards meeting the goals and objectives/benchmarks outlined in the IEP. There was a general consensus that teachers were doing the best they could with what little supports they were provided by district administrators. As Sam shared, “The school system was ill-prepared to teach children virtually; it was unprecedented.”

All parents took credit for and believed that their involvement made a difference in their child’s success. They felt their child’s success was directly related to how much support they provided. All parents were convinced their child could not have done the work if they had not helped set up the computerized meetings or worked with them on uploading homework or downloading instructions. Moreover, parents noted they were put in a precarious position having to play multiple roles (i.e., parent, teacher, & employee) which, at times was difficult, because many were juggling these tasks while still working full-time. As Sam shared, “Parents still had to go to work, or work from home so they could not “teach” their child how to use online learning even if they had the capability.”

Several parents felt the pressure of getting this right. For example, Hillary shared

For [James] it meant I was working from home and “doing the teacher’s job” while helping him stay on task or making sure he logged into the appropriate class. For the fall I was happy to have more face-to-face days and honestly didn’t know what they would do if [James] had to go back to virtual. Hillary continued He could hardly navigate the computer; it was next to impossible for him to switch from one class to another. I felt like the skills he needed were offered through virtual learning and that as long as I was able to help it was going to be fine. However, I worried about children who did not have the same familial support.

Tonya gave examples of how [Connor’s]

participation in class made a difference in his learning. When he was engaged in TEAMS meetings, actively discussing or sharing work samples she knew he understood more. When he was passive, or not paying attention she knew it was because he didn’t feel confident enough to participate, or that he was not interested. Amy lauded that [Jason’s] teacher had read alouds through ZOOM and that every child read just like they would in class.

She felt like activities that made children feel like they were with their friends was beneficial. Sam stated that for both of his children “Actively participating made a difference.” His daughter really benefited from “The teacher meeting with her one on one and having her complete tasks.”

Finally, all parents in this study had computers, internet connection, and could get online; but many noted—in the beginning—they did not know how to help their child navigate TEAMS, ZOOM, Schoology, or any of the other platforms districts utilized. Similarly, participants lamented that even after learning how to maneuver through the various systems, their children were unsuccessful maintaining focus, attending to task, or completing assignments without constant supervision. Tonya stated “Any success [Connor] had was a direct result of my and husband’s involvement; we both felt like we were teachers in the spring.”

## *Communication*

Teachers who reached out to students and parents through a variety of methods were more successful than those who made few attempts or only used one modality. Every parent who was happy or at least tolerant of the situation spoke highly of their child's teacher being available and willing to talk to them. Teacher communication gave students the opportunity to ask questions and learn. Teachers who utilized on-line learning modalities that put students face-to-face tended to be more successful than those who relied on a portal where teachers merely posted lessons or work. This milieu created opportunities for active participation by students which increased learning and student success.

Although unhappy with online learning, Sam stated "My son's teachers, therapists, and support personnel all stayed in constant contact with me and that they let me know when there would be changes in [Stan's] IEP or school procedures." Conversely, there were two parents who felt like spring was as good as it could have been. These parents praised their child's teachers for constantly being in contact with them and with the students.

For example, Sam praised his child's teacher for calling, emailing, texting, and sending messages through TEAMS. He shared

The classes met on TEAMS daily and that access was easy and manageable and bragged that teachers took the initiative to contact parents and at no time did he feel that they did not want to help [Kristy] succeed in school. Karen echoed these sentiments. She said [Sarah] got the attention she needed from the teacher without the distraction of students. I really felt this gave [Sarah] more individualized attention than she had in class and wanted to continue online learning.

Parents believed that having classes online in formats where children could interact were better than posted lessons. They felt that constant communication; especially communication that was initiated by the teacher helped to ensure their child was having their needs met. Knowing teachers were willing to talk to students and to give them time made a huge difference to parents.

Tonya said that she was told "We could have all the support and help we needed; they offered TEAMS, ZOOM, Facebook Live, phone calls, and conferencing. [Connor] used Schoology which I think works well for him." For example, "The teacher did do her novel study through Facebook and students could video themselves reading the story and submit it." She noted all of the aforementioned ways in which the teacher stayed in contact. Further, "It was important for children to have interaction with others and we utilized TEAMS and ZOOM for that purpose."

Parents who had children in general education classes often commented that their child's success had a lot to do with teachers being willing to do ZOOM or TEAMS rather than just posting assignments with little or no instructions. For example, Sam, lauded that his child's SPED teacher "Texted [Stan] often and kept in constant contact, his Gen Ed teacher included him in ZOOM meetings daily." Similarly Karen boasted that [Sandy's] "teacher held individual conferences with students who needed help, or that students could post their questions during class." Additionally she shared that "The individual conferences made a huge difference for [Sandy] and the anonymity of not talking to the teacher in front of everyone else had really helped her reduce her anxiety." Unfortunately Sam lamented "I liked my daughter's teacher, but that she didn't do anything" [to communicate].



## *Grievances*

Despite the positives the researchers identified two primary grievances (i.e. concerns) related to (a) regression and (b) routine. It should be noted that there was an outlier who was extremely critical of the entire process. The outlier's perspectives were divergent from the other participants and aligned more with the aforementioned newscasts and social media posts. Although the researchers were not able to triangulate this parent's dissatisfaction, the validity of criticisms, comments, and complaints are outlined below.

**Regression.** Without directly blaming teachers, three parents shared that the spring of 2020 was horrible; that their child not only didn't learn but that they regressed. These parents reiterated that there was no preparation and that teachers were suddenly telling students to do something they were unsure of themselves. One recurring frustration was school hours stayed the same. For example, "Lessons that were "live" and teachers who kept office hours were still during a regular school day." Parents who had to work did not understand why teachers didn't restructure the school day so more parents could successfully assist their child.

Students with disabilities often struggle with social interactions (see Arnett et al., 2021; Caprara et al., 2008; Frea, 2010; Ouherrou et al., 2019; Smith, 2007; Westling & Fox, 2009; Windsor, 1995) and this was evident throughout this study. Six of the participants noted that the isolation created an overall regression in their child's social skill competencies. Hilary noted "Sometimes being at school with like peers was the only time [James] had positive interactions with other children his age. Without school, or without social guidance and training, these skills were quickly lost." Derek echoed this concern, and stated [Gary]

really struggled with virtual school, and so did we. We had to work, luckily my wife worked from home so someone was with him; but she was logged in to her computer, she couldn't stop and help him. He is in full time special education, so you can imagine that there was no way he could really do virtual. When we were able to work it out; the classes still were not helpful to him. He's supposed to be learning social skills and living skills. Those are interpersonal, and hands on. He could not simulate washing clothes. Sure I get astronauts simulate going to space, but he cannot.

Hilary lamented

We have seen a great deal of regression with [James] throughout the pandemic due to educational changes, mostly related to socialization skills. As a young child he really struggled with entering new places and buildings such as doctors' offices, movie theatres, restaurants, stores and places of business. However, he has made a tremendous amount of progress in the last 5 years through repeated practice, social stories, talk throughs and videos. This seems to be the area that he has regressed in and is now having difficulty again with entering places. He has also had less interest in being around other people and while he had always had difficulty with crowds and loud noises, they seem to bother him more now after being home more. He did not do well with online and virtual instruction. He would usually have meltdowns and could only stay on live for 5-10 minutes without a small break. He had difficulty focusing or paying attention to the teacher or students on live sessions and the noise and chaos of many students moving and talking on one screen was very overwhelming for him.

All parents believed the last two months of the 2019-2020 academic school year were wasted, 85% of parents were optimistically eager to have their children return to traditional face-to-face instruction in the fall of 2020. Six of the seven parents mentioned seeing a significant loss of skill and overall regression in behaviors because of the time without instruction and desperately wanted their children to regain those lost skills and ideally make tremendous gains.

With the start of the 2020-2021 academic school year came new expectations. Parents who were forgiving in the spring demanded answers and commitment in the fall. These parents all understood their rights under IDEIA (2004) and knew that they had been infringed upon in the spring. However, given the unique circumstances, they were lenient with teachers and the respective districts because they knew the pandemic caught virtually everyone off guard and they were scrambling to make the best of dire circumstances.

However, despite the parents' desires, as the 2020-2021 academic school year started, 63% of the students were still receiving instruction 100% online, two were participating in a hybrid learning model, while only one went back to school full time. Not only was the modicum of reinstating traditional face-to-face instruction disappointing, with the exception of one, parents felt it was deleterious to their children's academic and social success. Karen shared, [Sandy] "had such a positive experience with virtual school that [we] chose that for her for the remainder of the year and are negotiating how they can continue this mode of learning throughout her educational career."

***Routine.*** Sam said that

The change in [Stan's] and [Kristy's] routine was definitely the most disastrous experience for my children, and that this year they constantly changed routines. Last March [Stan] and [Kristy] were sent home completely and had online live sessions. This year was somewhat better because they were able to go in person to the school some. Because they received SPED services [Stan] and [Kristy] were going 4 days a week when the county was on the 2 day blended schedule, which Sam thought was a great help! Amy averred that The school had very few students attending in person which meant [Jason] was able to get more one on one instruction in a quiet, less crowded environment. However, the schedule went back and forth between in person and virtual when there were school quarantines, the red colored state map, and snow days.

Research by Montebello (2020) confirmed what these parents said. The researcher suggested that the problem with online platforms is that they try to emulate face-to-face learning. He insisted that rather than failing at this, learning institutions need to stop doing what has always been done, and try a new approach. Transferring academic programs from the classroom to their eLearning counterparts is a well-known misconstrued yet highly followed practice that helped in giving eLearning a bad name and a poor chance of providing sound educational experiences. Young and Donovan (2020) supported this by stating that students with disabilities find learning online more difficult than general education students because they have more complicated needs.

***Outlier.*** Although the researchers heard many positive comments, one parent was distressed about how the quality of education, or lack thereof took place. This parent did not feel like the school, or teachers communicated with the family, or their child.

My child is older and could have made some decisions or initiated some of the on-line work with very little help; but because the school did not communicate effectively there was no instruction at all. I felt like [my child] got the education needed because we put in the time and energy to make it happen.

For example,

When students were sent home in the spring of 2020, the case manager never contacted [me or my child] to help navigate the system. [My child] was in self-contained English, math, social studies, and in a co-taught science class. No one monitored his progress or reached out to [me or my child], except for the regular education teacher in the science class. The regular education science teacher, not the special education teacher, met with [my child] one time and asked questions and chatted about science. Just Once!

I was more disappointed in what happened, or didn't happen than was mad. All of the teachers placed assignments on Schoology, and only one sent messages to the students to help them. Students were not taught new skills; so there were no live meetings and no video-taped lessons.

The parent said, "They did practical daily math applications, which [my child] needed, but did not introduce new concepts."

In the fall of 2021 the parents transferred their child to another high school hoping for a better educational experience. It was exactly the same.

Special education did not have any waivers during this time; they were required to meet IEPs. This meant for [my child] that in English, math, science, and social studies the teacher should have been meeting with him for 90 minutes a day; every teacher should have had a live class through TEAMS and followed [my child's] accommodations.

Math worksheets were placed on Schoology with some examples of how to do the work; the same consumer math [my child] did last spring. [My child's] English teacher set up weekly TEAMS meetings, weekly, and they should have been daily. [My child] rarely went to this meeting, and again, the case manager never checked in on [my child].

[My child] also had welding class during the fall; I understand how difficult that would be; but you'd think they'd have a simulation. The teacher did put the math that was required on Schoology; but offered very little explanation to go with the problems. [My child] only learned what we taught him, and had we been working full time or had other children or other responsibilities [my child] would have learned very little. This has been a disappointing experience. I know how hard I worked to educate [my child], but I know other kids who did not get that.

## **Limitations**

Aside from the State's social distancing mandates, which were easily mitigated, there were three primary limitations to this study including (a) limited research, (b) sample size and geographic location, and (c) demographic composition which are discussed below.

### ***Limited Research***

Although there is ample research related to instructional and assistive technology for students with disabilities (see Arnett et al., 2021; Bausch, et al., 2008; Dell et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick & Brown, 2008; Fitzpatrick & Knowlton, 2009; Fitzpatrick & Neild, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021; Wehman, 2013) the body of literature related to efficacy of outcomes of online instruction while teaching students under Covid-19 restrictions remains extremely sparse. Aside from editorials, various newscasts, social media posts, and tabloid anecdotes the overall impact of the expedient transition from face-to-face to 100% home-based instruction (i.e., online) has not been substantiated in the research. This gap in the literature made developing the foundation for the study somewhat cumbersome.

### ***Sample Size & Geographic Location***

Using a listserv, the primary researcher requested 60 parents participate in the study. Only seven parent's responded equating to 12%. Further these parents were from similar geographic locations. Although infrastructures may be commensurate, these two limitations make generalizing to different geographic regions and/or educational settings difficult.

### ***Demographic Composition***

The sample consisted of seven parents and eight children with low incidence disabilities. After a thorough review of the literature, it is clearly evident students with autism and other significant disabilities typically have difficulties attending to and completing tasks in isolation. However, having parents of students with high incidence disabilities (i.e., learning disabilities, emotional & behavior disorders, etc.) would have strengthened the data.

Finally, it is important to note that qualitative research typically has high levels of internal validity (see Lincoln & Guba, 1981; Merriam, 1995; & Patton, 2002) whereas there is very little external validity, or generalizability, as defined by Gall et al. (2003) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Therefore results should not be generalized, rather further explored. The following section provides three recommendations for future research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the systematic thematic analysis, aforementioned three themes, and in conjunction with the limitations of this study the researchers identified the following three overarching recommendations for future research (a) increase sample size and broaden geographic location; (b) interview teachers, administrators, and students; and (c) diversify demographic composition which are discussed below.

#### ***Increase Sample Size & Broaden Geographic Location***

As noted above, small sample sizes are reliable and valid within qualitative studies. However, the researchers would like to gain greater perspectives through a mixed methods study. Employing a qualitative and quantitative approach to encompass a larger number of parents while simultaneously including students, teachers, and administrators would add value to subsequent

research. Further, broadening the geographic location would strengthen the generalizability of subsequent studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1995).

### ***Interview Teachers, Administrators, & Students***

Rather than replicating this study, the researchers recommend using a mixed methods approach and incorporate teachers, administrators, and students to gain their perspectives regarding the teaching-and-learning process during the Covid-19 pandemic. Incorporating quantitative data gathered through surveys would help ascertain the perceptions and insights of many students, parents, and administrators; while still interviewing a random selection in order to gather qualitative data.

Teachers have the unique knowledge of what they know students need as opposed to how they were able to offer that during Covid-19; thus making their stories different than that of parents. Whereas students feel the frustration of having to learn differently, and to have to rely on more support not less from parents, and less support not more from teachers. Finally, administrators should be given the opportunity to hear the positives and refute the complaints of everyone involved and provide an analysis of how the pandemic impacted their day-to-day administrative functions.

### ***Diversify Demographic Composition***

Diversifying the composition of students with disabilities would not only broaden the scope of this study, but help determine how students with high incidence disabilities perceived the teaching-and-learning process. Including students with additional disabilities in future studies would enhance the voice to the population of students receiving SPED services. Broadening the disability classifications would offer a wider viewpoint of the qualitative and quantitative data and outcomes would add to the insufficient literature.

## **Summary & Conclusion**

This article summarized the stories of eight children with disabilities and their experiences learning how to navigate the virtual classroom. The researchers analyzed and evaluated parental perceptions regarding the positive and negative impact of the abrupt disruption to both general and SPED services students received due to Covid-19 in the spring of 2020 and the 2020-2021 academic school year.

The researchers identified three major themes (a) active participation, (b) communication, and (c) grievances with two subthemes (i.e. regression & routines. Limitations were identified and three recommendations were provided for future research. Finally, this study serves as a foundation for providing pertinent information—from a parental perspective—of the successes, frustrations, and hardships to help teachers and administrators, especially in rural school districts, plan for the future and help identify the most appropriate accommodations, modifications, and strategies to maximize learning outcomes in an online environment during difficult and trying times.

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