Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Special Educators' Strategies for Success

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the delivery of specially designed instruction for students with disabilities. Educators had to quickly shift their instruction without support from training and knowledge of best practices for virtual teaching. This study sought to understand how teachers were providing specially designed instruction during the pandemic in light of lack of preparation and training.

Keywords: *special education, COVID-19, virtual instruction, remote instruction, parental support, trauma*

Introduction

When the COVID-19 epidemic closed most schools during the spring of 2020, all educators were scrambling with how to facilitate instruction. Few schools had experience with distance learning, most were unprepared; nevertheless, school districts had to find ways to meet the educational needs of their students and reach out to the students and families. Although remote learning was an alternative, technology was an issue as some students did not have computers or access to the internet. This discrepancy impacted mostly students from low income and rural areas. Moreover, when more than one student resided in a home, who frequently attended different grades in the same school, access to the internet and the computer became an additional challenge. These unprecedented challenges, created by the pandemic, created new demands on the educational system.

Students with disabilities are expected to perform in school according to their personal individualized education plan (IEP), which defines expectations based on ability levels and monitors outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for parents and teachers (Rice & Dykman, 2018), as expectations of the outcomes were shifted when instructional delivery abruptly moved to home rather than face-to-face in a classroom. Although the IEP team was still responsible for delivery of all mandated specially designed instruction and services, full access was compromised. This study sought to understand how teachers were providing specially designed instruction during the pandemic.

The students with IEPs were still expected to achieve along with their nondisabled peers with the changed instructional methods resulting from the pandemic. Students with disabilities have specific needs that traditionally are achieved in the classroom along with their peers (Schuck & Lambert, 2020), but COVID-19 impacted and altered how instruction was delivered for all students (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). The expectations were that the IEP would still be followed, regardless of the learning environment. Students with disabilities still had unique needs that many

of their nondisabled peers did not, further complicating the transition to home and virtual instruction. Specifically, activities that mandated individualized instruction or other accommodations and modifications identified on in the IEP were addressed by caregivers. Students with disabilities in the general education classes may learn differently, however, these students had to be taught in specific ways based upon their expected level of performance and outlined by their IEPs, which includes goals, objectives, and progress monitoring.

Distance teaching quickly became the primary method of instruction, and for students with IEPs it developed into an issue of compliance (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). A new phenomenon was determining how to deliver significant support; explicitly, how did one maintain integrity for implementing and assessing instructional strategies to meet the child's individual goals and objectives when teaching remotely? Educational equity had to be examined as a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) was still required (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). Schools were mandated to provide FAPE to students with an IEP as a means of instructional delivery (IDEIA, 2004). Furthermore, if a paraprofessional was assigned to a student, the role of that person needed to be redefined, so the student still received the required services. The method for how paraprofessional support was going to be implemented during remote teaching remained unclear. This impacts the legal challenges related to implementing the IEP. The review of the literature will provide further explanation regarding these issues.

Review of the Literature

The challenges of being forced to instruct students remotely, particularly students with disabilities, was a new phenomenon. There were several important legal issues, such as continuing the services provided on the IEP, to be considered in addition to the educational modifications and adaptations (Vasquez & Straub, 2012). The instructional strategies moved from the school to the home, with the caregivers accepting the burden of providing an education to their children (Smith, 2020). According to Smith (2020), the urgency of the change combined with the lack of training created stress and anxiety for teachers and parents and obviously impacted students. Sorensen (2019) noted distance learning for students with disabilities focused on one-on-one instruction. Teachers were faced with the predicament of not being able to provide one-on-one instruction for each student on their caseload, because of time constraints during mandated school hours; therefore, they needed to provide group instruction. However, teachers were not able to seek established best practices in an effort to guide their instruction, due to little research existing at the time of lockdown that focused on group learning in a virtual learning environment.

Although there was limited research on group virtual learning, there were some studies that offered insight into effective ways of remotely teaching students with disabilities. Nieminen and Personen (2020) found that many students with disabilities, especially those with autism, benefitted from open access materials when learning online as opposed to learning in a face-to-face environment. The opportunity to replay a video, for example, supported the needs of these individuals when it came to asynchronous learning. Satterfield and Kelle (2016) found that students with autism were less distracted when taught from this approach when compared to in-person learning. However, unlike the pandemic scenario, in these studies frequently the parents voluntarily involved their children in distance learning.

Students with disabilities need to be motivated to learn in a distance education learning environment; without a level of motivation Greer and Smith (2014) reported that the students were not as successful. While some students spend much of their free time using technology, when it

comes to learning with technology, students require support and/or supervision from parents or other instructional support (Greer & Smith, 2014). This support often was not available due to the reality of caregivers having other responsibilities during the workday.

Schuck and Lambert (2020) indicated many of the students with disabilities, including autism, emotional-behavioral and learning disabilities, received their specially designed instruction in resource classes rather than self-contained environments. When a student receives pull-out services in a resource class, the allotted time is typically less than 60 minutes per day, whereas a self-contained classroom receives specially designed instruction for the full school day (Smith & Larwin, 2021). Students participating in inclusive general education classrooms often receive supportive services from a paraprofessional or other support staff (Oducado et al., 2020). General education teachers become dependent on this support for their students with disabilities (Smith & Larwin, 2021). Since the transition between in-person learning and remote access was short and unplanned, general education teachers were not able to receive the training they required to implement special education supports for their students with disabilities (Boyko et al., 2021).

Additionally, many of the technologies used to teach were only available in the school (Smith & Larwin, 2021). The teachers and school leaders had to make sure that proper instructional training was provided for distance learning to be effective. In some instances, software programs that reinforce learning in the traditional classroom, such as Seesaw and Google Classroom, had to be sent home with directions on how to use, where to start, and how much had to be taught per lesson (Smith & Larwin, 2021). The caregivers were obligated to learn how to implement and use this technology essential for their child's learning.

What is important to note is that during the pandemic the law still required that the IEP be followed. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004) clearly states that students must receive instruction in the least restrictive environment (LRE) regardless of how the students are taught (Nieminen & Personen, 2020) and schools were required to instruct all students, including those with disabilities. Some educators requested revisions to the IEP to accommodate the new way of teaching (Sorensen, 2019) with the expectation that participation and intervention remain consistent.

Many IEPs stipulate technology interventions to meet goals and objectives, which may not be easy to learn and implement (Brooks & Gierdowski, 2021). The varying difficulty of the technological tool is also something that must be considered (Brooks & Gierdowski, 2021). Moreover, the technology may be housed in the school rather than at home, which presented several conundrums: training, lending, and returning. Loan libraries for assistive technology (AT) provide opportunities for caregivers to use the AT needed for their child. These libraries provide hands-on training and support student needs (Brooks & Gierdowski, 2021). However, geographic location plays into the access of loan libraries with a lack in rural communities (AACcessible, 2021). AT can impact student performance because the technology is a critical piece of learning (Greer & Smith, 2014). Although instructional tools have been validated as reliable in the classroom setting with trained teachers, the validity and reliability may not generalize in the home environment with caregivers as the facilitators (Funder & Tamer, 2021).

Rice and Dyckman (2018) found that most of the implementation of distance education has occurred at the postsecondary level prior to COVID-19. There is limited research on how these strategies should be used at the elementary and secondary levels. Yet this was the group of students most impacted by the school closings during the spring 2020 school year. Furthermore, educators questioned how effectively the IEP would be followed with distance learning (Greer et al., 2015).

Much of this hesitancy was focused on the technology needed to follow the IEP at home, compounded when there was more than one student at home involved in the virtual learning environment.

Although there is limited information about learning from home for elementary and secondary age students (Barbour et al., 2012; Vasquez & Serianni, 2017), educators understand that safety and acceptance are at the forefront of an appropriate education for students with disabilities. Wolpow et al. (2016) remarked that safety and acceptance was one of the most essential elements of successful learning while maintaining high standards and was essential for student success.

Students with disabilities required a supportive and relaxing learning environment at home. However, during the pandemic parents and students experienced excessive stress, which included dramatic changes of instructional services. Adverse childhood experiences can negatively impact the ability of the student and the parent or whomever is supervising the learning at home. Instruction is best provided in a safe environment with an instructor that can be patient and supportive (Greer et al., 2014). Additionally, the lack of peer interaction and direct teacher contact created emotional stress in the distance learning environment (Serriani & Coy, 2014).

Trauma events include neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse, traumatic loss, natural disasters and more (Hodas, 2006; NCTSN, 2008). The pandemic impacted social and emotional well-being on the general population, however, the educational changes in services created trauma and stress for facilitators (i.e., parents & teachers), as well as students. The abrupt change, lack of routine, separation from peers, use of masks, isolation, and other factors created mild to severe trauma situations for many (Oducado et al., 2020). In addition, trauma has been connected to the use of technology (Serianni & Coy, 2014). For example, if the student is not familiar with the computer or Internet as used as a tool for teaching, they may be confronted with fear due to the lack of scaffolded support for effectively utilizing the technology (Bergeson & Beschorner, 2020).

Adverse experiences can be compounded by the degree of support the student receives at home. Every learner, especially the student with a disability, must be provided support and given a level of confidence that will support school success. Being supportive and patient are two essential elements needed to assure that students, when taught at home, are provided flexible instruction. The literature supported the need for more preparation and training of staff and caregivers to effectively implement distance learning. Knowing that there was a lack of preparation and training for emergency distance learning, as evidenced by the literature review, this study sought to understand how teachers were providing specially designed instruction during the pandemic.

Methodology

School administrators considered several options when it came to educating students with disabilities in a virtual learning environment. The use of video, audio, and software tools had to be available for the home. Training in the use of these had to be provided as did the use of the selected platform. While some of these are straightforward, all parties (i.e., students, parents, & teachers) had to learn how to access the electronic classroom and engage effectively. Although many students are tech savvy and understand how to use different elements of technology, for most, this was a new approach to learning. Moreover, students with disabilities may find the technology overwhelming, success depended upon the training. Professors giving instruction to new and practicing teachers were asked how to navigate the new instructional norm created by the pandemic. In order to inform their responses, the professors researched teachers using a survey to gather data on what methods were employed successfully.

A survey containing questions requiring a written response was sent to principals and superintendents in three Midwestern states, who then distributed the Google Form to special education teachers. This instrument was designed to collect demographic data and information on instructional practices and experiences using both a Likert type scale and short answer responses. A total of 69 surveys out of 900 sent were received and analyzed for content. An electronic drop box was created that allowed participants to submit their responses anonymously. Responses were tallied and reviewed.

It is important to note, several districts would not participate in any surveys in order to protect teachers who were overwhelmed with the demands of the pandemic. Further, a response rate of less than eight percent could suggest teachers cannot take on added responsibility or additional tasks. The following results provide details of the population and responses.

Results

The responses were divided equally between primary and secondary teaching experiences. Thirty-six of the teachers have taught 15 years or more. Twenty were beginning teachers and thirteen teachers taught 6-14 years. This information provided a background of how teaching experience played into the view of educating students. Almost 70% of responses came from rural schools, 17% came from suburban schools, and 13% from urban schools. The states from where these results were tabulated have a large rural population. This influenced the responses as the geographic location impacted families and schools.

The following categories address pertinent issues related to the investigation of the problem: special education service delivery, method of pandemic instruction, perception of parental engagement, modifications to IEP, and trauma. These areas define the parameters of the study.

Special Education Service Delivery

Prior to the pandemic, the majority of special education students received services in a resource environment, as evidenced by 73.8% of the responses that came from schools which practiced inclusion with some special education in a separate room. Full-inclusion and self-contained classrooms rounded out the remainder of the responses with 11.6% and 10.1% respectively. As a consequence of the pandemic, the delivery of specially designed services changed. The results of this change are presented below.

Method of Pandemic Instruction

A slight majority of the responses (53.6%) came from teachers who taught face-to-face five days a week. The remaining responses (46.4%) came from classes that were hybrid, which consisted of meeting face-to-face part of the time and virtually the rest of the week, with some instances of fully remote learning during quarantines. Out of the 46.4% that were hybrid, 11.6% of teachers reported they delivered hybrid instruction until halfway through the school year and then switched to face-to-face. For the purpose of this study, the results focused on classrooms that used a hybrid or fully remote model.

Seesaw and Google Suite were mentioned as platforms that were used for teaching, with Google Classroom of Google Suite being the most popular. Recorded mini lessons, virtual conferencing, and sharing exemplars were also employed. Learning games and printed packets that were

sent electronically were also frequently used. Regardless of the technique used, teachers reported short attention spans and motivation as key concerns of student progress. Some of the educators noted that nothing seemed to work because the students had to take sole responsibility for sitting at the computer and independently completing their work. In these cases, parents were rarely able to supervise and guide the child to remain on task.

Live streaming and live classes were also mentioned as the appropriate tools that enhance learning. The respondents felt that students were more focused and on-task when it came to learning synchronously. When combined with Google Classroom or another platform, teachers indicated that student responses were enhanced. Scheduled check-ins were also mentioned as a tool for student success.

When it came to attention span, alertness and screen fatigue, the findings yielded results which did not support virtual teaching. Teachers indicated the students took frequent brain breaks, along with teachers asking the parents to support the on-task behavior of the student. When it came to block teaching, educators stated that they broke the time into segments where direct instruction would be provided, and the rest of the time would be independent work. One responder stated that a class period is 86 minutes and that 30 minutes of that time was delegated to synchronous teaching and the remaining time was given to complete assignments or work quietly. The overall response indicated that the teachers gave frequent breaks so that students could focus. Videos and assignments were given, but they were short. The use of breakout rooms and whiteboards were strategies that were widely used to maintain the attention of the students. A response that was consistent with teachers is they allowed for modification of the activities. Some reported that they would contract with the students on a weekly basis so that they knew exactly what was expected of them. This helped the teacher plan lessons and guide the child to successful completion of the assignments.

Almost a quarter of the teachers (24%) responded that the quality of completed assignments was poor. They felt that there was too much wasted time because of frequent breaks and that this impacted the quality of the instructional delivery and content. Many students did not complete the assignments and their grades were negatively impacted. When it came to attention, 25.4% of the responders stated the biggest challenge was lack of student engagement and participation. There was little, if any, consequences if the students did not complete their work. Additionally, 17.4% of teachers had a challenge with students not logging on or attending virtual sessions. Since many parents worked, have more than one child, but only one computer, teaching virtually became difficult. When the parent had to work, this put an additional stress on the family, and it negatively impacted student performance.

While the method of instruction was impacted due to the pandemic, caregivers played a critical role in the delivery of instruction and monitoring of engagement and work completion. The results are shared below.

Perception of Parental Engagement

Over half (54.4%) of the teachers indicated they received little to no involvement from the parents. They stated the parents were not involved in the hybrid environment nor do they provide assistance with the remote portions of the classroom. The teachers reported that the students worked mostly individually when it comes to completing schoolwork. As one teacher shared:

> Many students did minimal work or something that was different than the assignment because the parent either didn't understand [the assignment] or they were not available to

> help their student during the day. So, they want…teachers to be available from five at night to nine o'clock. (Anonymous, 2021)

This expectation was unsustainable for the teachers.

Parents are an integral member of the IEP team which determines the goals and delivery methods of instruction for children with disabilities (IDEIA, 2004). Ideally parents and caregivers are fully involved in the education of their children. However, this ideal was not found in the results of this survey. With a change in environment due to instruction becoming remote, one would assume the IEP would require modifications. The results are shared below.

Modifications to IEP

Forty-nine percent of teachers indicated they did not have to make changes to the IEP due to teaching virtually. Since many buildings were closed, involving parents had become more difficult due to the lack of face-to-face contact. Of the remaining 50%, respondents indicated that a remote plan was added to the IEP. These plans allowed for more independent work and changed the way instruction was delivered. Some of these plans included accommodations, such as sending home rocking chairs and wiggle stools to support students' ability to focus. An overwhelming number of teachers who responded stated that providing individual instruction where the parent applied the accommodation or modification was utilized. Some responses indicated that goals were reduced or not able to be progress monitored due to remote learning.

A strong majority (80%) of the teachers reported it is not difficult to monitor assessments in a virtual environment. The responses stated that modifying the evaluation tool was relatively simple and that administering and scoring it was not an issue. One teacher shared "Modified tests were read via Google Meet and oral responses were accepted. Performance tests were recorded virtually. Testing medium changed due to the materials available. More individualized and project-based assessments were implemented" (Anonymous, 2021). Alternative assessments included objective questions and short answer responses using Google forms; teachers felt these adequately addressed the modified learning materials.

Challenges were experienced due to abrupt change in environment with lack of training, parental involvement, student attendance and engagement, and quality of work. These issues were part of the trauma both students and teachers experienced. The results are shared below.

Trauma

Sixty-four percent of the teachers indicated they were experiencing trauma as a result of the pandemic. The responders stated that limiting work hours, taking care of personal business, and taking frequent breaks helped them to overcome some of the stress. While some teachers were implementing stress-management techniques, others did not due to lack of time, overwhelmed or other reasons not specified. One teacher expressed:

> Teachers are showing signs of stress this school year. The added responsibility of teaching students in person while simultaneously teaching students remotely is difficult. While teachers are expected to be more lenient with students and their course work, I feel like the same is not being offered to teachers. My workload as increased significantly without any

> compensation or acknowledgement of the extra burden. I am not [currently] implementing strategies to deal with the extra stress. (Anonymous, 2021)

Almost 70% of the teachers who responded found that their students were suffering trauma as a result of virtual learning. Trauma events specifically related to loss and the natural worldwide pandemic (Hodas, 2006; NCTSN, 2008). As far as the students were concerned, teachers reported that they provided structured free time when the children could interact and, in the case of younger children, be involved in play. Allowing music and headphones during individualized instructional time was also permitted as were one on one meetings with the students and when appropriate, with the family. One respondent shared:

> Time EVERY day for interpersonal exchanges, moments to just communicate, relax, and hopefully LAUGH. Messages and semi-private conversations with students and parents to address concerns and listen for current issues. Keeping an open mind for any and every strategy I may use to help students and myself improve. (Anonymous, 2021)

Many responses included being flexible and more tolerant with students helped to ease trauma.

These results demonstrate the challenges and strife teachers, students, and caregivers experienced during times of virtual learning. Implications of the research indicate a need for thoughtful and planned support in case of future quarantined instruction. Suggestions for future approaches will be explored below.

Discussion

One of the most important outcomes of this study was that teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the quality of student work was negatively impacted by virtual learning. The educators stated that the students received too many breaks and did not finish quality assignments. There is possibly a relationship between this concern and the amount of parent support provided. Since many parents must work while their child is home learning remotely, this may cause a problem in following through with assignment completion. Also, if there are multiple students at home learning virtually, this can impact learning because the family may not have the resources needed to provide internet or computer access for more than one child. Although some schools provide laptops or Chromebooks to students, this is less likely true in rural or low-income areas. This is true particularly in rural areas where sometimes, Internet access is scarce.

One successful approach to teaching students with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis was the use of varied teaching strategies. Providing pre-planned lessons and activities that were motivating for the students appear to support learning. It is important to note that a more detailed plan of adaptation of the IEP reflects better outcomes.

It appears that many of the platforms utilized by schools provide a substantial approach to learning. These platforms can be used for the purpose of enhancing the quality of educational delivery by using all the benefits that were available. These platforms provide a multitude of opportunities that support and enhance learning. Particularly when it comes to teaching virtually, it is important that these platforms be adapted to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. The individualization of using these platforms may take time, but to assure student success, this must be accomplished.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include lack of available literature due to topic being current and not having been thoroughly researched. The number of responses to the survey were limited because teachers were feeling overwhelmed by their increased obligation of virtual instruction without proper training and support. Geographic location was limited in scope as the researchers only sought to study select midwestern states, with a focus on rural communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should seek to expand geographic location in an effort to support the generalization of results. Studying teacher preparation programs including the focus on remote instructional strategies would support future conclusions and recommendations. In addition research on the trauma educators experienced during the pandemic would be beneficial for understanding and promoting positive outcomes.

Summary & Conclusion

There is no doubt that virtual learning has changed the way we approach teaching students with disabilities. Our children and teachers have been impacted and we must find ways to adapt instruction to meet the needs of individual learners. Making sure the students are being effectively taught and are learning is an essential part of this process. Without dedication from the teachers and support from the parents, our students will not gain the requisite knowledge necessary to become contributing members of society. School leaders must also commit to the process in order for it to be successful.

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