The Experience of Special Education Teachers During COVID-19

Nancy A. Howard

19152469

2022

Supervisor: Michele Kehoe

Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts

(Hons) Degree in Psychology, Submitted to the National College of Ireland, March 2022.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland

Research Students Declaration Form

(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: Nancy A. Howard

Student Number: 19152469

Degree for which thesis is submitted: B.A. (Hons) in Psychology

Title of Thesis: The Experience of Special Education Teachers During COVID-19

Date: 28/03/2022

Material submitted for award

A. I declare that the work has been composed by myself.   ✔

B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been
    distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically
    acknowledged.   ✔

C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access
    repository NORMA.   ✔

D. I declare that no material contained in this thesis has been used in any other
    submission for an academic award.   ✔

Signature of the research student: *Nancy A. Howard* **Date:** 28/03/2022

Acknowledgements

There are several people I would like to acknowledge for helping me reach this milestone. First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents for believing in me and supporting my decision to obtain this degree. Huge thanks especially to my Momma for always being my biggest cheerleader. Making you both proud will be my biggest accomplishment.

Sincerest thanks to my best friends John and Jess. John, I don't even know where to start. If not for your support, I never would have had the courage to leave the westside of Sandusky. I will never forget questioning myself if I was making the right decision to leave the States in 2016. Thank God I made that leap, or I would not be where I am today. There are not enough words to express my gratitude for your guidance and constant support. You have made such a difference in my life!

Jess, I am beyond grateful our paths crossed. I can't thank you enough for always rooting for me and helping me to believe in myself. I know I would not be getting this degree without you, thank you!

Special thanks to my first Irish Family-Ted and Jean. I know you both are the reason I am living a life I love here, in Ireland. Jean, your words, "If it were easy, everyone would do it!" have been a constant reminder throughout this research process. So very thankful for you both!

Thank you to my dear friends and classmates Gráinne Long and David Flood who have supported and encouraged me since day one of this degree. I could not imagine getting through these years without you both. Your support and encouragement have made such a difference. The field of psychology will be a better place with you two in it. I can't wait to see everything you accomplish!

Sincere thank you to my amazing supervisor Michele Kehoe. I am so fortunate to have you as a supervisor. I cannot thank you enough for all your support and encouragement throughout this journey. Your reassurance and guidance have had such an impact on me. I have so much respect and admiration for you not only as an educator, but as a person. Thank you for helping me find my confidence in my work.

I would also like to acknowledge the wonderful Learning and Teaching staff at NCI. Special thanks to Conor Thompson for all your great advice and support. Your ability to teach is a gift to the students you help.

This study would not be possible without the wonderful educators who participated in it. My sincerest gratitude for you taking part. Your commitment to your students and your profession is truly inspiring. You all have my sincere respect and admiration.

To my favourite teacher of all, my sister Cathy. Thank you for always being my tutor in life.

And last but certainly not least, gigantic thank you to Paul. Moving to Cork was the best decision I ever made. Finding you was finding my home. Thank you for always putting my best interest first.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the loving memory of Kris Noble. Because of you, I learned how to live!

I would also like to dedicate this work to anyone who has ever been told they couldn't achieve their dream. If I, a 41-year-old newly diagnosed dyslexic, can return to college and earn this degree, anything is possible. **Never give up, you are your best investment!**

Abstract

Background and Aims: COVID-19 dramatically changed the world we live in. Since 2020, studies have begun to report how COVID-19 has affected American teachers in mainstream education. There is limited qualitative research regarding how this pandemic has impacted special education teachers, those responsible for vulnerable student populations. The aim of this study is to explore and understand the experiences of special educators teaching during this very challenging time.

Method: Participants who have been teaching in special education prior to 2020 were recruited via convenience sampling ($N = 5$). All participants were special educators from a Michigan school district. The ages of the participants ranged from 27- 49 years. ($M = 41.2$, $SD = 8.67$) Questions regarding the participant's experience teaching in special education during COVID-19 were asked during semi-structured interviews with each participant. The data was analysed by using the method of Braun and Clark's (2022) phases of thematic analysis. *Results*: Five key themes were revealed after the thematic analysis was conducted: (i) Unprepared for a changing work world, (ii) A workload of 'many hats', (iii) Personal effects of teaching during COVID-19, (iv) A passion for special education, (v) COVD-19 insights. *Conclusions*: The experience of teaching special education during COVID-19 was a time of stress and uncertainty for these educators. Through the challenges and personal negative implications, the participants remained dedicated to delivering the best education possible to their students. The stress related to additional workload, and personal effects of teaching special education during this time must be evaluated to best prepare educators for future pandemics. It is critical the mental health and well-being of special education teachers be better supported to retain quality educators in this very challenging field.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout the history of special education, teachers have faced many challenges working with diverse student populations who have different needs and individualized academic goals (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2014). The addition of a global pandemic made this very demanding profession even more challenging. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the 2020 closure of schools due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) impacted 60 million students nationwide in America (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). Children learning from home, through online distance learning, were without the needed educational resources and social interactions of the pre-coronavirus school day. This new method of learning affected 6.7 million students that receive special education services, a population most at risk of regression when education is disrupted (Frederick et al., 2020). Teachers, the frontline workers of education, were forced to rapidly change their methods of teaching overnight.

1.1 History of Special Education in America

The United States was founded on the ideologies of equality for all however, for many generations, Americans have faced challenges with equality in education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines special education as, "instruction and support provided to students with mental, physical, social, and or emotional disabilities" (Harmon, 2021). According to the 41st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA, 2019, the umbrella of disabilities entitled to special education services includes but is not limited to: developmental delays, autism, speech or language impairments, learning disabilities, health impairments, intellectual disabilities, and emotional disturbances (US Department of Education, 2019). United States law prohibits exclusion of special needs students yet has failed to fully support inclusion (Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020).

Special education in the United States was cultivated from two centuries of educational, social, and legal struggles (Hallett, 2014). The civil rights movements of the 1950's and 1960's awoken the acknowledgement of the rights of children with disabilities needs to be met. The racial segregation case Brown v. Board of Education was an influential court case that prompted change in the educational system for students with disabilities. Advocates of children with disabilities recognised the ruling that "separate but equal" being declared unconstitutional should also apply to special needs students (Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020). However, it wasn't until 1972 that laws that excluded students with disabilities were demolished after the ruling in Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia. This court case ruled children with disabilities must have equal access to public education (Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020). Both the Brown v Board of Education and the Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia, cases led to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act 1975. This milestone legislation authorised students with disabilities receive free public education regardless of their needs and must have individualised education plans (IEP) to best support the specific needs of every special education student (Swafford, 2022).

1.2 Legislation

Through the years, the United States continued to progress with equality in education by amending laws concerning students with disabilities. In 1990, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), removing the restrictive term 'handicapped' from legal language (Francisco et al., 2020). This evolution of improving the language and policies in special education continued and in 2004, IDEA was reinstated as Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. Amendments to this added new requirements for special education teachers including more

certifications in core areas taught as well as state licensing (Francisco et al., 2020). President Barack Obama signed Rosa's Law in 2010, which removed the term 'mental retardation' in Federal laws and replaced it with 'intellectual disability' (Vanbergeijk & Lengyel, 2021). This modernization of legal language emphasises the importance of the government's role to ensure equality for individuals with special needs.

A review by Spaulding & Pratt (2015) described the US history of special education as having three eras: early reform, stagnation and regression, and contemporary reform. Although significant progress has been made, other nations may argue that the American special education system is inadequate. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states that education should be inclusive on 'all levels' and as listed in CRPD Article 24: "Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development consistent with the goal of full inclusion" (Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020 p.4) Kleinert (2020) reported it is estimated that one half of special needs students spend less than 40% of their time in a mainstream classroom. This alternative placement suggests that there is much work to be done in order it meet the standards of CRPD.

1.3 A Challenged Field

Special education teachers in the United States have faced a vast number of challenges and adversity throughout the history of special education. Billingsley (2004) acknowledged the shortage of special education teachers and high attrition rates that affects this area of education. New educators enter the field with a strong desire to make a difference, however within the first five years of their career, approximately half of special education teachers in the U.S. will leave their position. Students with learning disabilities are adversely affected when professional supports are lacking and teacher retention is not achieved (Billingsley, 2004). Studies have

shown that workload and paperwork are two main reasons for leaving special education teaching positions (Paquette & Reig, 2016; Billingsley, 2004) The U.S. Department of Education reported that 46 of the 50 states had significant shortages of special education teachers in 2017 (Hester et al., 2020) It is logical to expect COVID-19 has impacted these statistics.

1.4 Mainstream Education versus Special Education

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the satisfaction and dissatisfaction between mainstream education teachers and those who taught students with behavioral or emotional impairments has been examined. Stempien and Loeb (2002) found that special education teachers scored lower in job satisfaction than those teaching students in general education classes. It was also reported that individuals who taught children with severe emotional and behavioural challenges, expressed higher levels of stress and frustration (Stempien & Loeb, 2002). Additionally, Stempien and Loeb (2002) also reported teachers of special needs children found fewer rewards in their career than the mainstream educators. It was hypothesized this was due to the fact it is often challenging to determine students' progress when standardized methods are unable to be used. These findings, along with the rational that special education teachers have more one-on-one time with their students, outline some of the challenges of teaching children with special needs. It is reasonable to expect these demands would now be magnified by the impact of COVID-19.

1.5 Teacher Burnout

Special education teachers experience burnout when the level of job-related stress the educator is experiencing, is greater than the individual's ability to cope and manage that stress (Brunsting & Sreckovic, 2014). Soini and colleagues (2019) investigated the emotional well-being of special education teachers. In comparison to mainstream teachers, it was reported that

special educators often feel more emotionally exhausted and often have the perception that they are not doing enough to help their students. The longitudinal study examined teacher burnout and working environment which included how well teachers were supported by their colleagues and the atmosphere of the classroom. In the five-year follow-up, Soini et al. (2019) reported that special education teachers experienced moderate levels of exhaustion and cynicism towards their teaching community. It was also reported that teacher-pupil relationships were improved in the follow-up period and less inadequacy was reported. Soini and colleagues (2019) concluded that work environments received high approval, suggesting that special education teachers were supported in their work and were not at risk of burnout. This study is highly significant because the follow-up component of this research was conducted just before COVID-19 altered everyday life. It is notable when viewed in light of the impact of COVID-19 on teachers (Sayman & Cornell, 2021; Trust & Whalen, 2020) It would seem that the pandemic may impact stress levels and now push special educators towards burnout.

1.6 The Onset of COVID-19

In order to slow the spread of COVID-19, on March 12, 2020, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer ordered the closure of all public and private schools from March 16th until April 5, 2020. In her announcement she stated, *"I am working with partners across state government to ensure educators, parents, and students have the support they need during this time, and to ensure our children who rely on school for meals have access to food. I know this will be a tough time, but we're doing this to keep the most people we can safe"* (Clarke, 2020).

Trust and Whalen (2020) investigated the unsettling switch from teaching in the classroom to teaching remotely in the United States. Of 325 participating teachers, 68% had no experience with online teaching, leading to feelings of being unprepared and overwhelmed (Trust &

Whalen, 2020). Educators in this study reported new challenges in their profession including reliability of student's internet at home and frequently changing guidelines from the government. Professionals from grades K-12 were the focus of this study, the challenges of teaching those with special needs was not addressed (Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Raghul and colleagues (2021) researched the difficulties special education teachers in India had during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study highlighted that these educators lacked training to teach special education on an online platform. Of 30 participants, 80% reported a lack of training for remote teaching and 90% of the participants reported that online instruction was difficult due to insufficient online learning resources for special needs students (Raghul et al., 2021). It is apparent special education teachers worldwide were not prepared to rapidly switch their method of teaching overnight.

A study by Sayman and Cornell (2021) noted that after the 2009 H1N1 swine influenza pandemic, few studies investigated the experience of teaching during that time. Research from that pandemic could have potentially benefitted today's teachers. Sayman and Cornell (2021) stress the importance of obtaining qualitive research and understanding the experiences of those teaching during the current pandemic. Qualitive data is vital to better prepare teachers for future pandemics. The study consisted of 12 special education grad students, of these participants, only one teacher had been teaching for over one year (Sayman & Cornell, 2021). Themes of confusion, anxiety, frustration, and loss were prominent throughout the research. One participating teacher summarized the emotions of the experience by referencing the quote, "we are building the plane while trying to fly it" (Sayman & Cornell, 2021, p.198). It is obvious the rush into distance learning created a lot of anxiety for educators.

1.7 The Current Study

      The COVID-19 pandemic is a reminder that we are living in uncertain times. Osman et al. (2020) states that other outbreaks are likely to occur due to the unlimited amount of coronavirus existing in bat populations, making it extremely difficult to eliminate. It is essential we learn how to reduce the effects pandemics have on our society. The current study aims to address the lack of qualitative research investigating the experiences of special education teachers during COVID-19. This research will uncover themes in order gain a better perspective of what Michigan special educators endured during a pandemic. The aim of this research is to discover themes that will lead to a better understanding of how special education teachers navigated through the pandemic and what can we learn from these experiences to be better prepared for future pandemics.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1 Study Design

Qualitative research was chosen for this study due to the fact this type of research is

highly functional when exploring new issues and aiming to gain a better understanding of the

experiences and lives of participants (Nestor & Schutt, 2019). Qualitative research also provides

the researcher with data that is naturally occurring and focuses on meaning rather than measures

(Braun & Clarke, 3013). Through semi-structured interviews, consisting of open-ended

questions, the experiences of teaching during COVID-19 were investigated. Participants were

asked questions related to what it is like to currently be a special education teacher in Michigan,

USA. Challenges, support, and preparedness for teaching in a pandemic were also addressed in

the interview schedule (See Appendix A).

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. The researcher had initial

contact with a special education teacher working in a Michigan school district. Word of mouth

referrals were made by the educator and interested colleagues were invited to contact the

researcher by email. Interested potential participants were informed of the nature of the study by

email. Inclusion criteria for the study was for current Michigan special education teachers over

the age of 18 years, who had been teaching in special education prior to 2020.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is difficult to determine an appropriate sample

size for qualitative studies. Nestor and Schutt (2019), recommend that researchers continue with

participant selection until the 'saturation point' is reached and no new information is being

discovered. In contrast, Braun and Clarke (2022), state there is no efficient way to determine

dataset size. Researchers are advised that the focus of thematic analysis should be on a rich

interpretation of the data. Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest the amount of data needed for a study of this nature cannot be determined before the research has begun.

For the current study, a total of 6 special education teachers expressed an interest in participating. However, due to the demands of these educators, the final sample consisted of 5 teachers. Participants comprised of 4 females and 1 male with an age range from 27 to 49 years ($M = 41.2$, $SD = 8.67$). The average amount of years teaching was 12 years. All participants were currently employed within the same Michigan, USA school district.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

The current study was approved by the National College of Ireland Ethics Committee. The well-being of the participants was of the utmost importance to the researcher. Each participant was provided with an information sheet which included the purpose of the study, what was required from participants, and information regarding confidentiality (See Appendix B). Participants were informed that the names of anyone mentioned during the interview would not be published. Participants were also ensured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher also made it clear that participants could take a break at any point during the interview if needed. The researcher followed the ethical guidelines of the National College of Ireland and the Psychological Society of Ireland throughout the entire research process of the study.

Informed consent was given by the participants before interviews began for the study. All participants ticked a section on the consent form and returned it by email to the researcher as means of consenting to participating in the current study (See Appendix B). To ensure confidentiality and protect the anonymity of participants, the interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams were deleted after transcripts were printed and checked for errors. All

transcripts and any other information related to the study were stored on the researcher's password protected personal laptop. Printed interview transcripts were securely stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home.

2.4 Study Procedure

Participants contacted the researcher by email to notify interest in taking part in the study. Participants were then emailed detailed information regarding the study, including the information sheet and consent form (See Appendix B). Participants were also asked what time of the day was most ideal to be interviewed. Once informed consent was obtained, online interviews via Microsoft Teams were arranged at the time of the participant's convenience. Two participants chose to take part in the interview during their preparation time while at work. The other three participants conducted their interviews from home. Data collection for this study took place over a two-week period.

Approximately 30 minutes before the interview, participants were emailed a link from Microsoft Teams to access the online meeting. Once the interview began, participants were reminded that they could take a break at any time if needed. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner and addressed the questions in the interview schedule but also allowed for flexibility and flow of conversation (See Appendix A). The researcher began the interview by asking the participant to describe what it is currently like to teach special education in Michigan. This was followed by questions regarding how prepared the participant felt to teach during a pandemic. Questions involving the challenges and rewards of teaching special education at this time were also asked. Interviews were recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Teams and ranged in time from 19- 61 minutes ($M = 32.4$). The large time range was due to some participants conducting interviews while at work and were under time restrictions.

Immediately after the interview participants were emailed the debriefing sheet (See Appendix C). The debriefing sheet expressed a thank-you to the participant for their time and contribution to the study. Participants were also reminded to contact the researcher if they would like to be informed of the results of the study. Information concerning the Freedom of Information legislation; regarding the review and or, withdraw of data was also shared in the debriefing sheet. The researcher concluded the debriefing sheet by listing appropriate supports that the participant could connect with if they experienced any emotional distress from participating in the study.

2.5 Data Analysis

In a recent review, Fornaro and colleagues (2021) note that the qualitative researcher brings a bias to the interpretation of the data based on the experiences, beliefs, and culture of the researcher. It should be acknowledged that the researcher was interested in the experiences of special education teachers due to the fact the researcher has professional experience working in education.

2.6 Data Analysis Procedure

According to Braun and Clarke (2022) it is the responsibility of the researcher to analyse data in a manner that allows the researcher to tell a rich story about their research question. After interview transcripts were printed and checked to assure accuracy, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. The first step involved the researcher becoming submerged in the data. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the information. Once the researcher had a grasp on the material, patterns and codes were marked using different colours for different categories of information. Data that appeared meaningful or connected with

interviews of other participants was highlighted. (See Appendix D for a coding sample) After

codes were identified within the data, information was organized into potential themes and sub-

themes. The final themes were determined by creating a thematic map. (See Appendix D)

Chapter 3: Results

This chapter presents the results of the current study. Five key themes emerged from the data during the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts: (i) Unprepared for a changing work world, (ii) A workload of 'many hats', (iii) Personal effects of teaching during COVID-19, (iv) A passion for special education, (v) COVID-19 insights.

3.1 Unprepared for a changing work world

"It was almost like we were all lost, you know? I mean, you're scared with a pandemic. The kids are scared. And, it was afternoon, and the kids were told take all of your things because you're not coming back for a while. We had no preparation when the announcement was made." (P5)

Michigan special education teachers' work life changed dramatically overnight with Governor Gretchen Whitmer's announcement of school closures in March of 2020. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed feelings of uncertainty and unpreparedness when classroom teaching was moved to the world of virtual learning. Participant 1 described in detail the memory of their work life dramatically changing:

> So, we had a ten-minute staff meeting in the lounge with our principal to let us know that you're not going to see your students for two weeks and told us to prepare packets to send home. We didn't have much time to process it so, that day they had like the music teacher and gym teacher, they went into classrooms and were helping the teachers to make copies or get packets ready to send home with the students. (P1)

When ask how the participant's teaching ability was affected by the sudden transition to online education, Participant 1 explained:

> So, I have students that are aged three to five with various special needs. Paper and pencil activities don't really cut it when they're trying to learn, so it was hard. But we did the best we could, we printed our packets and we sent them home. (P1)

All participants expressed the feeling of uncertainty when being rushed into this new way of teaching: "I was not prepared at all. I mean the first couple of weeks. I think everyone was unprepared for it because we didn't really do anything. It was this kind of sit and wait." (P4) Participant 3 also reflected on the push into their new work environment: "So, I mean like everyone was scrambling the entire day to put together packets of work for the two weeks to send home with the kids. […] we thought that was going to be it like. You don't think this is going to happen. It just blindsided everybody" (P3) The uncertainty of how COVID-19 would affect their method of teaching was described by Participant 5: "I didn't have an online (teaching) program, we didn't at first. We didn't know we needed one." (P5)

The frantic switch to online delivery was met with several challenges. Participant 2 described their experience of their work environment changing so rapidly:

> Like no one knew, we weren't prepared at all. I mean everybody was scrambling to get stuff that the kids could do virtually. I mean it was a hot mess. A lot of kids they just stopped going to school. Some kids didn't have the option you know internet doesn't

work for now, or the other kids in an area where Wi-Fi is not great like high speed.

Internet is not a thing still out in the country. So, there were barriers for sure. (P2)

When asked how the challenges of student 'internet availability was met for the participant to reach those students who did not have adequate internet access, Participant 2 responded:

The school offered a hotspot in the parking lot so you could bring your kid and sit in the parking lot and do online stuff. But I mean some parents they work during the day, so they couldn't bring their kid and other people were just like I'm not bringing my kid to sit in a parking lot. (P2)

The reflections of the onset of COVID-19 highlight how rapidly special education teachers had to switch to an online platform of teaching without sufficient time for planning. Educators also lacked the time to properly prepare their students for this transition. There was no time to instruct students on how to navigate Zoom video calls, which would be the new classroom during the pandemic.

3.2 A workload of 'many hats'

"I get all of these long checklists of things done and that I know apparently. Noting all the different COVID things for legal reasons, because special education can tend to be so litigious at times, so constantly checking that." (P4)

The data illustrated that the COVID-19 added more demands onto the heavily challenging field of special education. New responsibilities and pressures were mentioned by all participants of this study. "Trying to set up meetings and trying to do everything when the

schools were closed via Zoom. And the parents' schedules. It was very difficult." (P3) "My whole team was like oh my goodness, we have got to go back to the old basics." (P5) Participant 2 also commented on COVID-19 issues that have added to their responsibilities as a special education teacher: "Because even now if a kid gets quarantined, we're supposed to offer online stuff. Not all kids utilize it, but some want to. So, teachers are having to do more work" (P2)

Participant 4 described in detail how the pandemic has added more work to the roles of special education teachers and the direct effects of this additional work:

> Lost two teachers in our district this year that have stepped away from teaching. And I know there's several more that have considered it. And then even several more that have considered moving to a different district for various reasons. It's difficult to continue to wear more and more hats and kind of expect the same pay. The real only way to make things better is to lighten everyone's workload, which is a larger systemic issue. I think everyone is just continuing to wear more and more hats and do more and more things. It's only contributing to the less and less teachers that we have available in our workforce, which for the rest of us left in it, just makes it more and more stressful then. It's just kind of this endless cycle. (P4)

When asked how the workload could be improved, Participant 4 responded:

> I think administrators just need to do everything they can to check in on their teachers and take as much off their plate as they can of those kind of non-essential busy work things, and really assess what is important in the work I am giving my teachers. To get

more teachers into the workforce and to keep more teachers in the workforce, you've got to pay them better and you have to treat teachers better. (P4)

It was mentioned in several interviews that due to COVID-19 online learning and student absenteeism; several participants are having to reteach skills to their students. Two participants noted that some of their students first years of attending school was during the pandemic. Participant 4 reflected on this group of children:

We call them our 'COVID Kinders' because they were the first group to really experience a large chunk of their year missing. […] we see the difference that a lot of these kids have compared to maybe our 5th or 6th graders that went through a lot of school without missing any time when they were 3rd graders, for example. (P4)

Participant 3 expressed how they are now needing to provide revision and instruction of core concepts for their students:

I'm teaching concepts normally; we would be well beyond. Working in the environment I work in; no students are on the same level. I have five different levels of things going on at the same time you know for the math that they're in. They're all at a different level, but to have students that like I have had. I've had to backtrack and teach everybody how to do touch math because (they) were having difficulty adding single digit numbers. And

that was across my entire class. And that is highly unusual. I mean, it's normal to have, you know, maybe one or two students but for everybody, that's unusual. (P3)

Participant 1 described the added challenges of not only reteaching academic skills, but also now being faced with working with new demands of motor delays. Participant 1 described they delays they are encountering:

The current teaching situation is a struggle because the kids that I have, you know, like I said, the three- to five-year-olds So, these kids, a lot of all they know is COVID. They are lower than students I have ever had in the past. It's not just the speech and language delays. We have a lot of kids with poor gross motor skills. (Uh) because of not being able to be outside or at the parks we have; we're having a lot of things to do, like a lot of physical therapy interventions in our classroom. (P1)

Participant 1 further explained how COVID-19 has impacted the physical setbacks of their students:

I have some kids that are four and when they get in a four-point position, like for crawling, they can't hold their head up because they're so weak. Or they can't sit down on the ground because they're used to just slumping in the couch or in a recliner. So, I think it's (COVID-19) not only affected the kids academically but physically. And like I said, these are just the kids with special needs, so they already have delays to begin with. But we're seeing delays that are bigger than what we've had in the past, and

a little different. Before, we had a lot of speech and language delays,

now we have more gross motor delays as well. (P1)

Two participants also reflected on how teaching remotely added extra working hours to their day. Often these educators would sacrifice evenings and weekends to accommodate parents' schedules. "I had my Zooms (calls) at different times and then I had to make my phone calls and it was not easy for anybody." (P1) Participant 3 explained how teaching from home consumed a large portion of their week: "I didn't set boundaries. It was non-stop and the only day I did not see students was on Sundays. [...] I had a hard time saying no." (P3) It is apparent the demands placed on these educators during COVID-19 were significant and did not stop after a 40-hour work week.

3.3 Personal effects of teaching during COVID-19

"I cried a lot." (P1)

The data demonstrates that teaching special education during COVID-19 affected teachers not only on a professional level, but personally as well. The added workload responsibilities and working hours impacted the physical and mental health of these educators. Participants consistently expressed feelings of stress across all interviews. Reoccurring descriptions of this period of teaching being "hard", "tough", "trying" and "stressful" were present throughout all interviews. "[…] being in special ed, I sometimes feel like I'm on an island by myself." (P2) "The job became more stressful." (P4) Participant 3 reflected on how teaching during the pandemic was negatively affecting their well-being:

I was meeting with students on the weekends, at 7pm-8pm at night, at 6am in the morning […] I was trying to be as flexible as possible […] Physically and emotionally that took a toll on me. I was doing what I thought was best for my students but ignoring what was good for me. (P3)

Participant 3 explained further how their mental and physical health was affected at this time of teaching special education:

I get migraines and it definitely took a toll on me; you know I had increased migraines because of stress. (Uh) my weight drops off unhealthily. […] I know it probably sounds silly to complain about losing weight, but like it was not healthy. It was just not a healthy thing for me because you know, I've got migraines and then I'm losing weight I don't have to lose. […] I think I cried more than I have in my entire career. (P3)

Two participants expressed how challenging it was to teach their students virtually while also parenting their own children. "It was a struggle because they're (participant's children) not old enough to stay home alone yet." (P2) Participant 1 also mentioned that this time was challenging as professional and personal worlds were blended: "As a parent myself, it was hard because now I am teaching my students from my house and then also trying to make sure my children are getting an education as well." (P1) Participant 1 further explained:

> It's hard because you feel like you're putting other kids before your own. Because I could never just sit and focus and help my kids do their work because I had my Zooms at different times. […] Looking back at it, it was terrible. I gained gained excessive amounts of weight. I was stressed. (P1)

The data also illustrated that a lot of teachers experienced additional worry and concern for their students during this very challenging time. "You're just stressed that you're not able to reach these kids at the right times to provide them with their services." (P4) Participant 5 also voiced their concern for their students' progress during COVID-19: "My students require so much support. That was hard to do via Zoom. […] I'm sending everything home and we're never getting it back, which is fine, but I'm not able to truly measure their progress." (P5) Participant 1 elaborated on the concern for their students' learning:

> They're not getting the same quality of education. I might be saying the same thing that I would do in the classroom, but they don't get to (uhm) you know see and do in person. They don't get to touch the manipulatives that I have in my hand to help all their different senses, to help maybe understand a concept a little bit better. It was hard. (P1)

The data highlights the deep concern for the students' learning and well-being during a pandemic, added a lot of emotional stress to an already taxing occupation.

3.4 A passion for special education

"It's giving time to the students and not giving up on them. And pushing them; you know it's like being a mom." (P5)

Along with the many challenges and struggles of teaching special education during COVID-19, the concern for the students and the commitment to their learning, were exceedingly apparent in all interviews. The average years teaching special education amongst participants was 12 years and it is evident the passion for teaching still resides within these educators. All participants communicated an unyielding dedication to their students. The success of their students is what inspires these teachers to carry on even in the most challenging of times. Three of the five participants spoke of 'light bulb moments' that they witness in their career. When asked what the most rewarding part of being a special education teacher is, Participant 2 was quick to respond: "I think this has been true the whole time, (during COVID-19) when you see a kid get something, the light bulb moment yeah." (P2) Participant 1 provided an insight of their joy when a student has a 'light bulb' moment:

When you see progress. Like when you finally make those connections when they finally learn a skill that you have been working on forever. […] When you see that progress, it is so nice. So, it's those little glimpse of the light bulb above their head that makes it worth it. (P1)

Participant 4 was also very passionate when describing what they find is most rewarding about being a special education teacher:

It's the classic when things click for kids, it's this wonderful moment. When they start to grasp something, especially in a special Ed preschool, a lot of what I do is just focusing on language. […] Those joyful moments when kids put together a couple of words into a

full sentence for the first time, or (um) even for my nonverbal kids that are using images just to communicate; when they communicate those wants instead of getting frustrated. Those little successful moments are really good. […] And I think that's what keeps the majority of us coming back, no matter how difficult the day can get at times, you know those kids are still going to be here and still need somebody. (P4)

The participants are clearly driven to make a difference in the lives of those they teach. Participant 5 described their feelings on working in the special education field:

We're making a difference. I guess you know I just love my job. There are days that I'm like, oh gosh can we have a snow day? But I do, I love what I do. It's all I've ever done. I mean, I've taught for 14 years, but all I have ever done in my whole life is work with people with special needs. […] What I'm doing, it's how they (the students) impact my, you know, my heart and just they're my kids. I get to have lots of kids. (P5)

The data highlights the participants' commitment to their students and a passion for teaching special education even under the most challenging circumstances.

3.5 COVID-19 insights

"Teaming up with an ancillary service, that was amazing! Working with the occupational therapist where we would do Zooms together." (P3)

Amongst the many challenges and personal sacrifices that COVID-19 brought to the field of special education, all participants mentioned gaining some type of benefit or insight during this difficult time. A large consensus was the gained convenience of conducting meetings now

on online platforms. "I had more people in attendance than ever in the history of IEP (Individualized Education Plan) meeting […] which I think opens the door for more people to be able to attend." (P2) Participant 1 also felt the convenience of meeting with parents now online was a huge benefit:

> When I have my yearly IEP's with parents before, I always felt so bad because some of them will have to take a day off of work and I know that's a loss of income, where now I'm like, I'll Zoom. […] We can have meetings like that. That's one of the big things that I took away from that. […] being able to meet with parents via the computer, instead of making them take a day off work to come in." (P1)

Two participants voiced feeling that they got to know their students better during the COVID-19 pandemic and now have a better understanding of their students' family and home life. This perspective never would have been gained before the pandemic. Participant 3 addressed their new knowledge of their students:

> It was the insight into the home lives, that was definitely an eye opener, a big eye opener. You know we see the students and we see how they behave in school, and we see how they act. […] It was very eye opening to see to see the dynamic inside the home first hand. It actually helped me to understand my students a little better. It was just very eye opening to see living conditions, situations, family dynamic in the house. […] Different things you wouldn't normally understand. It was kind of heart breaking. (P3)

Participant 5 also viewed this period of teaching made them more connected to their students:

Sometimes it's just the environment or the way you're doing something, and I think COVID really helped us do that because I was able to work in such small groups and get to know the students so much better than when I have a big class and everybody is reacting to everyone else. (P5)

Through all interviews, a sense of support for fellow teachers and faculty was largely apparent. "I think the teachers were all supportive of each other and our principal tried to do everything she could to lighten the load." (P4) Participant 5 also mentioned having a supportive principal:

You know I do something completely different here than what other classes (mainstream classes) do, but I know our principal would help if I needed something, he would be out there. We have a wonderful principal and especially for this class. […] I'm very blessed to have a great team here. (P5)

Participants voiced having the support of colleagues; however, two participants addressed a lack of public support. Participant 2 explained that the public had misconceptions of what it meant to teach virtually: "I think people thought we had time off during virtual school. I think people's perceptions of what teachers have been doing during virtual school is not accurate at

all." Participant 3 gave a detailed account of the lack of community support for teachers during COVID-19:

All these things I'm seeing on social media about the laziness of teachers,

like when we were virtual, we weren't doing anything. The media portrayed

that. […] In the beginning, we were lumped in with the showing support for

the nurses and the doctors, and the paramedics, and then all of a sudden, it's you know,

its teachers are doing nothing. It was very hurtful especially considering I knew how

much I was doing as a special education teacher. (P3)

The data shows the participants have gained much insight from teaching special education during the COVID-19 pandemic and felt supported by their colleagues. However, it is also evident that the public may have little or no concept of the challenges and struggles this group of educators faced during this time.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The aim of this study was to use an inductive qualitative approach to investigate and explore the experiences of Michigan special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five key themes emerged from the data after conducting a thematic analysis of the interviews: (i) Unprepared for a changing work world, (ii) A workload of 'many hats', (iii) Personal effects of teaching during COVID-19, (iv) A passion for special education, (v) COVID-19 insights. The participants of this study described teaching during the pandemic as a very stressful time in their career; filled with much anxiety and extra workload. However, despite the challenges all participants maintained their dedication and reflected on the lessons that were derived from teaching during a global pandemic. This chapter presents a discussion of the key findings alongside recommendations and implications.

The current study illustrated that the rush into online teaching was very unsettling to the participants of this study. All five participants described feeling unready for their work environment to dramatically change. Within the theme 'Unprepared for a changing work world', participants reflected on this time as being 'blindsided' and 'scrambling' to gather the proper materials for their students to have at home to proceed with online learning. Consistent with the findings of the Sayman and Cornell (2021) study, teaching during COVID-19 was a time of confusion and anxiety for the participants of this study. These findings were also in accordance with both the Trust and Whalen (2020) and Raghul and colleagues (2021) studies, in which participants reported feeling unprepared to teach remotely. It is important to note that participant 1 from the current study mentioned that online resources for special needs students was a challenge to provide. This lack of proper e-learning materials is highlighted in the data from the Raghul et al. (2021) study. The findings suggest that training special education teachers for

online delivery is now essential. It is also vital for special education students to have immediate access to quality online educational materials in the event of school closures and or, student quarantine scenarios.

COVID-19 added more obstacles to the demanding field of special education. Within the theme, 'A workload of 'many hats', participants described how they were now under the pressure of longer working days, added paperwork, and the extra workload of reteaching concepts that were forgotten throughout the pandemic. These effects of teaching during this time, align with previous research that has highlighted workload and extensive amounts of paperwork are factors for special education teachers to leave their positions (Hester et al., 2020; Paquette & Reig, 2016; Billingsley, 2004). Participant 4 acknowledged that two teachers have left their positions during the pandemic. Billingsley (2004) addressed the critical shortage of special education teachers in the U.S. It is highly probable the added workload COVID-19 brought to the field of special education, will only add more shortages in this area of education. Education officials must evaluate how these educators can be better supported to reduce the demands of these teachers. The data also addresses the regression in academic skills and gross motors skills during COVID-19. Further research in this area is critical to investigate more effective measures to assist special education students in retaining skills no matter what platform education is delivered.

Soini and colleagues (2019) found that special education teachers reported greater levels of emotional exhaustion than mainstream educators. It was also found that special education teachers carry the fear that they are not doing enough for their students. The data of the current study mirrors these findings. Teaching during COVID-19 was affecting the participants personally. Some participants reported physical health issues of migraines, weight loss, weight

gain. Emotional stress was also prevalent throughout the data. All 5 participants voiced their concern for their students' well-being and learning during the pandemic. Participant 4 was especially concerned for the welfare of their students at this time: "If they were at home, I'm worried that they weren't getting any sort of learning at times or even just mentally were they drained from being at home because their home life wasn't the best." (P4) It is apparent from the data teaching at this time was emotionally exhausting and took a physical toll on some of the participants' health. Further wellness research is necessary to discover which interventions would be most beneficial to special education teachers.

Despite the obstacles and stress that COVID-19 added to special education, the participants dedication and commitment to their profession was prevalent throughout all interviews. The theme 'A passion for special education' highlighted the participants' zest for teaching. Several participants mentioned they are driven by the "light bulb" moments: victorious moments when a student learns a new concept. Participant 4 reflected on these moments in detail (See 3.4).

Participant 3 works with teenage students with special needs and described the pride of seeing their students' progress: "[…getting them (students) into a job placement is awesome!" (P3) In contrast to Stempien and Loeb (2002) findings which reported special education teachers having lower job satisfaction than mainstream educators, these participants expressed high satisfaction with their career. Participants of this study had a mean of 12 years teaching, which illustrates their commitment and vocation for teaching special education even in the most challenging of times.

The final theme identified was 'COVID-19 insights'. Although this time of teaching special education was challenging and required these educators to quickly adapt to a new method

of instruction, the participants found several positive takeaways from teaching during COVID-19. All participants mentioned the benefit of online platforms to now conduct meetings with parents, saving both the educator and the parents time and any associated costs of travel. The online platform also allowed for the participants to gain a better understanding of the students' home life. The participants never would have had access to this part of their students' lives if not for the experience of teaching during the pandemic. Most participants said they now knew their students better because of this more personal approach to teaching.

In the follow-up portion of Soini and colleagues (2019) longitudinal study, it was reported if work environments received high approval rates, the risk of teacher burnout was lower. The participants of the current study expressed feeling supported by colleagues and principals during the time of COVID-19. It was also apparent the participants had a genuine concern for the well-being of their fellow teachers. When asked what advice they could provide fellow teachers during this difficult time with, participant 1 responded:

> At the end of the day, you just need to know that you're doing the very best that you can, because you're not going to be able to reach the kids like you did in the classroom. But if you know you're doing your best, you have to know that is a win. You have to go to sleep at night knowing you tried hard. (P1)

Perhaps this sense of support from colleagues and school officials is a factor that helped prevent the participants from reaching the state of burnout during COVID-19. More qualitative research from the pandemic is necessary to fully understand what these educators experienced and how they coped during this period of their career.

4.1 Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this research is that this is a qualitative study. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe qualitive research as recording the 'messiness of real life' and organising the organic data to tell a rich story about participants. Due to the fact COVID-19 is a new phenomenon, it is imperative to have qualitative research to capture the experience of teaching special education at this time before these experiences are forgotten. The semi-structured interviews used in this study, allowed the researcher to capture the true 'messiness of real life' the participants encountered during the pandemic. Insights of the teachers' experiences may have not been truly discovered if using quantitative research methods. This research will contribute to the large gap in the literature regarding the experiences of special education teachers during COVID-19 and how educators navigated through the pandemic.

Another strength of this study is that it brings an awareness to teachers, the frontline workers of education throughout the pandemic. As mentioned in Chapter 3.5, two participants felt the public had no concept of what it was like to be a special education teacher at this time. This study highlights the passion and dedication these educators have for their students throughout the most challenging times. It is crucial to recognise these civil servants and the work they have done for a vulnerable population during extremely demanding circumstances. Educators deserve the same gratitude and respect we would give to all service workers who continued to work through the uncertainty and stress of COVID-19.

As a novice researcher there are limitations in this study that should be acknowledged. One major limitation is the research was conducted during a global pandemic and in two different countries. These factors made it impossible for interviews to be conducted in person. Although Microsoft Teams meetings allowed for this study to take place, it is hypothesised that

interviews may have been longer if conducted in person. As mentioned in chapter 2.4, two participants scheduled their interview while they were at work. This limited the amount of time the researcher had with these participants and the amount of information that was shared by the participants.

Other limitations include the gender imbalance of this study. According to Braun and Clark (2019) it is not possible to determine the amount of data that will be needed before a study has begun. Unfortunately, due to the tight timeframe of this research, it was not possible to recruit more males for this study. It should also be acknowledged that all participants currently teach in the same school district. Data from other Michigan school districts would have been beneficial to gain a broader scope of what it was like to be a special education teacher in the state at this time.

4.2 Implications and Future Research

The current findings of this study call attention to the stress and challenges special education teachers experienced working during COVID-19. The mental and physical health of the participants suffered during this time. These findings should alert school officials that educators should be properly trained in online delivery to eliminate the stress and anxiety of being unprepared to teach under these circumstances. School officials should also consider regular wellness and self-care interventions for their teachers. It is likely that if the proper wellness programs would have been in place prior to the onset of COVID-19, participants may have not experienced such an intense level of pressure and distress.

The current study also emphasises the need for more research on the regression of special education students during the pandemic. An alarming 4 out of 5 participants remarked how they are having to reteach concepts that they have never had to reteach before. These findings should

alert school officials not only of the added workload of their teachers, but more critically what learning was lost during this two-year pandemic. As addressed by Frederick et al. (2020) the 6.7 million special education students in the United States are most at risk of regression when education is disrupted. It is crucial that more research be conducted to investigate how to assist these students better to decrease regression, regardless of the method of education delivery. Motor setbacks of special education students during COVID-19 should also be investigated thoroughly. Longitudinal studies of these students will be necessary to fully understand the implications of COVID-19 had on the special education population and field.

4.2 Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the experiences of Michigan special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five themes were generated from the data: (i) Unprepared for a changing work world, (ii) A workload of 'many hats', (iii) Personal effects of teaching during COVID-19, (iv) A passion for special education, (v) COVID-19 insights. These findings call attention to the challenges and personal sacrifices these teachers endured during this time. Physicist Albert Einstein (1879- 1955) once stated, "The measure of intelligence is the ability to change." This research highlights these educators' adaptability and commitment to an education system that is historically unequal. Just as individuals have had to fight for rights of special needs students, school officials must strive to retain these resilient professionals.

References

Billingsley, B. (2004). Promoting Teacher Quality and Retention in Special Education. *Journal Of Learning Disabilities*, *37*(5), 370-376. doi: 10.1177/00222194040370050101

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research a practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research In Sport, Exercise And Health*, *13*(2), 201-216. doi: 10.1080/2159676x.2019.1704846

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis*. London: Sage.

Brunsting, N., Sreckovic, M., & Lane, K. (2014). Special Education Teacher Burnout: A Synthesis of Research from 1979 to 2013. *Education And Treatment Of Children*, *37*(4), 681-711. doi: 10.1353/etc.2014.0032

Clarke, K. (2020). All Michigan K-12 Schools to Close for 3 Weeks Due to Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak. Retrieved 13 March 2020, from https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/local/2020/03/13all-michigan-k-12-schools-to-close-due-to-coronavirus-concerns-officials-say/

Cornett, J., & Knackstedt, K. (2020). Original sin(s): lessons from the US model of special education and an opportunity for leaders. *Journal Of Educational Administration*, *58*(5), 507-520. doi: 10.1108/jea-10-2019-0175

Crawford, A., Zucker, T., Williams, J., Bhavsar, V., & Landry, S. (2013). Initial validation of the prekindergarten Classroom Observation Tool and goal setting system for data-based coaching. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *28*(4), 277-300. doi: 10.1037/spq0000033

Fornaro, C., Sterin, K., & Struloeff, K. (2021). Qualitative data collection tools: Design, development, and applications by Felice D. Billups. *Current Issues In Comparative Education*, *23*(1). doi: 10.52214/cice.v23i1.8144

Francisco, M., Hartman, M., & Wang, Y. (2020). Inclusion and Special Education. *Education Sciences*, *10*(9), 238. doi: 10.3390/educsci10090238

Frederick, J., Raabe, G., Rogers, V., & Pizzica, J. (2020). Advocacy, Collaboration, and Intervention: A Model of Distance Special Education Support Services Amid COVID-19. *Behavior Analysis In Practice*, *13*(4), 748-756. doi: 10.1007/s40617-020-00476-1

Hallett, F. (2014). The SAGE Handbook of Special Education. *Cambridge Journal Of Education*, *44*(1).

Harmon, A. (2021). *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

Hester, O., Bridges, S., & Rollins, L. (2020). 'Overworked and underappreciated': special education teachers describe stress and attrition. *Teacher Development*, *24*(3), 348-365. doi: 10.1080/13664530.2020.1767189

Johnson, E., & Semmelroth, C. (2014). Special Education Teacher Evaluation. *Assessment For Effective Intervention*, *39*(2), 71-82. doi: 10.1177/1534508413513315

Kleinert, H. (2020). Students With the Most Significant Disabilities, Communicative Competence, and the Full Extent of Their Exclusion. *Research And Practice For Persons With Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 34-38. doi: 10.1177/1540796919892740

Masonbrink, A., & Hurley, E. (2020). Advocating for Children During the COVID-19 School Closures. *Pediatrics*, *146*(3). doi: 10.1542/peds.2020-1440

National College of Ireland. (2017). *Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research Involving Human Participants*. Dublin.

Nestor, P., & Schutt, R. (2019). *Research methods in psychology*.

Osman, E., Toogood, P., & Neamati, N. (2020). COVID-19: Living through Another Pandemic. *ACS Infectious Diseases*, *6*(7), 1548-1552. doi: 10.1021/acsinfecdis.0c00224

Paquette, K., & Rieg, S. (2016). Stressors and coping strategies through the lens of Early Childhood/Special Education pre-service teachers. *Teaching And Teacher Education*, *57*, 51-58. doi: 10.1016/j.tate.2016.03.009

Raghul, D., Aravind, B., & Rajesh, K. (2021). Difficulties Faced by Special Education Teachers during COVID-19 Pandemic. *International Journal Of Early Childhood Special Education*, *13*(2), 1245-1251. doi: 10.9756/int-jecse/v13i2.211172

Sayman, D., & Cornell, H. (2021). "Building The Plane While Trying To Fly" Exploring Special Education Teacher Narratives During The COVID-19 Pandemic. *Planning And Changing*, *50*(3/4), 191-207.

Soini, T., Pietarinen, J., Pyhältö, K., Haverinen, K., Jindal-Snape, D., & Kontu, E. (2019). Special education teachers' experienced burnout and perceived fit with the professional

community: A 5-year follow-up study. *British Educational Research Journal*, *45*(3), 622-639. doi: 10.1002/berj.3516

Spaulding, L., & Pratt, S. (2015). A Review and Analysis of the History of Special Education and Disability Advocacy In the United States. *American Educational History Journal*, *42*(1), 91-109.

Stempien, L., & Loeb, R. (2002). Differences in Job Satisfaction Between General Education and Special Education Teachers. *Remedial And Special Education*, *23*(5), 258-267. doi: 10.1177/07419325020230050101

Swafford, M. (2022). Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.

The Psychological Society of Ireland. (2011). *Code of Professional Ethics*. Dublin.

Trust, T., & Whalen, J. (2021). Emergency remote teaching with technology during the COVID-19 pandemic: using the whole teacher lens to examine educator's experiences and insights. *Educational Media International*, *58*(2), 145-160. doi: 10.1080/09523987.2021.1930479

US Department of Education. (2019). *41st Annual Report to Congress on Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act 2019*.

Vanbergeijk, E., & Shandrick Lengyel, L. (2021). A Brief History of Special Education Milestones in the First 50 Years. *EP Magazine July*, 37-40.

Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Research Question: What was the experience of teaching special education in Michigan during

COVID-19? *The aim of this research is to explore and understand the experiences of special educators teaching*

during this very challenging time.

Please describe what it is like to currently teach special education students in Michigan.
What is most rewarding about your job?
What were your biggest challenges teaching through COVID-19?
How prepared were you to teach during a pandemic?
Did you feel supported at this time?
How did teaching during COVID-19 affect you personally?
Did you experience anything positive at this time, or feel you gained anything from this experience?
Do you have any advice for fellow teachers, administration, or government officials regarding your experience?

Appendix B

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Dear Potential Participant,

Hello! My name is Nancy Howard, and I am a third-year psychology student at the National College of Ireland. I have worked with teachers most of my adult life and have a special interest in working with special needs children. For my final year project, it was clear I wanted it to involve special education. I am a Michigan native, so this region of the world is extra important to me, and I hope to contribute to voicing the opinions of educators there.

As we all know, the effects of COVID-19 have been extremely hard on students and teachers. It is my hope that my research will provide helpful insights to the experience of what it was like to teach children with special needs during a pandemic. I am hopeful that my study will help us to best prepare teachers for future pandemics. This study will involve a semi-structured online interview with me. Questions involving what it was like to teach during COVID-19 will be asked. I am estimating it will take one hour to complete the interview.

This study has been reviewed and has received ethical approval from National College of Ireland Research Ethics Committee. A copy of this approval is available upon request. You have been asked to take part in this study because you are a special education teacher in Michigan. Your participation is completely voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw at any point of this study. Once my data has been submitted, I would be unable to remove your information from my report. Your information will be completely confidential and your name or any names you might mention in the interview, will never be published. All information you provide during the interview will be stored on my own password protected laptop. There will be no personal identifying information about you in my report however, I will need to record the interview. Once the interview has been transcribed, the recordings will be deleted immediately.

The research will be presented as my final year thesis and presentation and will remain with the National College of Ireland. I do not foresee any negative consequences for you in taking part in this study however, if you should experience any stress the interview can stop, and you are allowed to take any breaks as needed.

If you need any further information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my project supervisor:

Nancy Howard- x19152469@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor Michele Kehoe- michele.kehoe@ncirl.ie

Thank you for your time! If you agree to participate, please tick the space below and forward to me.

I agree to participate in this study _____ I have been teaching for _____ years Age_____

Gender_____ Best time of day to be contacted_____

Appendix C

Participant Debriefing Sheet

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my research. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share your experiences teaching during COVID-19. The ideas and opinions generated from participants will be analysed and compared to find broader themes of what it was like to be a special education teacher during COVID-19. It is my hope that this research will help special education teachers be better prepared and supported for future pandemics. If you would like to be informed of my results, please feel free to email me: x19152469@student.ncirl.ie

The Freedom of Information legislation ensures that you may also contact me if you wish to withdraw your interview or if you wish to view your data. As outlined by the National College of Ireland's data policy, your data can be viewed any time within five years after your interview has taken place. (February 2027) It is important to note that if you wish to withdraw your interview from my study, it must be requested before 2-14-2022.

As I mentioned in the participation information sheet, I do not foresee any negative consequences in taking part in this study however, if your participation has caused you any emotional distress here are some numbers to reach out to for help:

SAMHSA7 Treatment Referral Helpline- 1-877-726-4727

Mental Health America- 1-800-985-5990 or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746

Text or Call BetterHelp.com

Remember your mental health matters!

Many thanks for your participation! I hope the rest of the school year goes well and that the struggles and challenges of teaching during COVID-19 will soon be behind you.
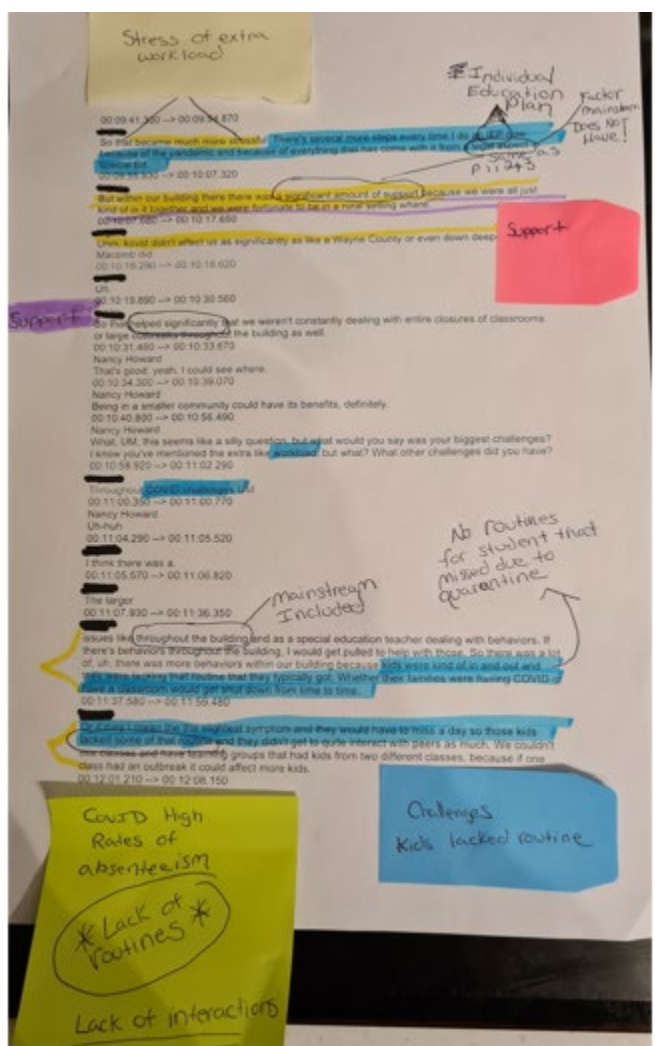
Kind Regards,

Nancy A. Howard

Appendix D

Thematic Map and Coding Sample

Figure 1: Thematic Map

Figure 2: Coding Samples

Ah, the parents schedules. it was it was. It was very difficult.
00:05:23.530 --> 00:05:24.300
█████ (Guest)

Uhm?
00:05:25.380 --> 00:05:27.480
█████ (Guest)

The UM?
00:05:29.600 --> 00:05:39.530
█████ (Guest)

Occupational therapist and I would kind of team up and do our our zoom meetings together where?
00:05:39.980 --> 00:05:44.950
█████ (Guest)

Uhm, we would kind of tag team which kind of made it fun for the kids.
00:05:45.720 --> 00:06:05.840
█████ (Guest)

So I would do something that we were working on for their goal and then she would do something and have them come actively moving around, doing something for their occupational therapy goal, which I thought that was that was great because the the the students really seem to enjoy that, so they would do something.
00:06:06.610 --> 00:06:09.580
█████ (Guest)

You know either math or.
00:06:10.320 --> 00:06:12.680
█████ (Guest)

Or writing or reading related with me.
00:06:12.970 --> 00:06:13.580
Nancy Howard

uh-huh
00:06:13.950 --> 00:06:15.580
█████ (Guest)

She would have them get up and do.
00:06:17.040 --> 00:06:24.780
█████ (Guest)

Perfect. you know, like herself was the fun stuff 'cause they were gonna like you're crawling or you know doing different activities for her.
00:06:25.260 --> 00:06:25.980
█████ (Guest)

Uhm?
00:06:26.970 --> 00:06:29.750
█████ (Guest)

But we we do We did a lot of that.
00:06:31.290 --> 00:06:31.760
Nancy Howard

I.
00:06:31.450 --> 00:06:33.300
█████ (Guest)

During that time off.
00:06:33.720 --> 00:06:44.490
Nancy Howard
I can't imagine going into a new position and like uncharted territory to begin with and then add this on top.
00:06:45.450 --> 00:06:49.500
█████ (Guest)

Yes, it was. It was exceptionally.
00:06:49.550 --> 00:06:51.540

Handwritten annotations: Stress; Team work; Same as P1; Support; Team work! Coworker support; Adding Variety; Benefit; Stress of Uncharted territory