Forming Special Education Teachers during the Pandemic:
New Teachers' Sense of Self Efficacy

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Abstract

This paper examines special education new-teacher perceptions about the impact of shifting from teaching children with disabilities in person to a remote learning delivery. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted formal education and shifted special education service delivery to a 'remote modality'. Health restrictions and community lockdowns literally pushed teachers into online delivery systems *beyond their own learning experiences* and *into their students' homes*. The research methodology employed is a mixed methodology approach, where the responses from a six-open-question survey were coded and quantified. Based on these results, administrators and policy makers have to consider changes to accommodate this paradigm shift to better serve students with disabilities, a matter of educational equity and social justice.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, disability, teacher preparation programs, self-efficacy.

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Purpose

Special education teacher training programs are geared towards preparing teacher candidates to teach in a customary brick-and-mortar, in-person service delivery system. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted formal education for all school-aged children and shifted special education service delivery to a 'remote modality'. Thus, educators in the USA and all over the world were launched into uncharted territory to teach online. While we are in the 21th century, with access to a plethora of educational technology, ironically, the education system is not prepared to shift into an online mode or mindset or for service delivery remotely. The disruption caused by Covid-19 impacted special education programs even more, as the logistics to stay in compliance with IDEA is complex.

This paper examines special education (SPED) teacher candidates' perceptions of the impact of shifting from teaching children with disabilities in person to an online learning delivery. The authors are professors at a private university that provides a special education credential (certification) program. Their role is to ensure candidates in the program are committed to educational responsibility that serves students with disabilities and safeguards their access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Nevertheless, given the restrictions of the pandemic, this mission became more challenging than ever.

This study is framed by the following questions:
(1) What are the perceptions of special education teachers' self-efficacy as a result of the shift from face to face to online remote delivery for students with an IEP?

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(2) Do SPED teacher candidates feel they met the IDEA mandated expectations, including IEP goals?

The results of this investigation are of interest to all agents implicated in the educational process, including, but not limited to: parents, teachers, post-secondary education professors, support staff, administrators, and policy makers.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study draws from Schalk's Critical Disability theory (2017) to shed light on inequalities for students with disabilities as the shift to online service delivery has left students with disabilities disfranchised and underserved. Schalk's explains that critical disability theory is a methodology with goals of producing knowledge in support for social justice. Critical disability theory is connected to *lived* experiences with a transformational agenda. Minich describes the methodology to include critical intersectional analysis with an element of accountability to people with disabilities (2016).

According to Education Week (2020) in the USA, overall 13.7 percent of all students (ages 3-21) are receiving some type of special education services per IDEA. Many states vary in the requirements for teacher preparation; nevertheless, most of the teacher credential programs focus on a face-to-face service delivery approach. There are also different paths to a teaching credential (certification). For example, in addition to the traditional credential programs, such as pre-service, California offers the internship credential as an alternative path to a teaching credential. The internship credential allows a teacher candidate to teach as a teacher of record with a contract while completing the credential program at an accredited Institute of Higher Education (IHE).

Special education teaching practices are anchored in IDEA 2004 to provide free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to ensure students with disabilities receive differentiated instruction. Access to the general education curriculum via an individualized educational plan (IEP) includes possible related services such as speech, physical and occupational therapy, psychological services, therapeutic recreation, etc. IDEA was written in the context of the formal (and dare we also say, even temporarily, "former") education model, which is instructor-centered, based on face-to-face interaction with support staff.

Teacher preparation programs focus on preparing teacher candidates to differentiate instruction that helps students with special needs meet highly structured IEP goals (Lindner, Alnahdi, Sebastian, & Schwab, 2019). Pre-service teachers and interns are taught how to identify, apply, assess, and reflect upon transformative best practices that promote student understanding and meaningful learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Social emotional learning has assumed greater importance over the last decade because it enriches not only peer interaction, but also the quality of teaching (Blewitt et al., 2020).

In numerous studies, as teachers gained experience in the classroom, researchers surveyed their perceptions and expectations across a wide variety of areas: social emotional learning, differentiated instruction, blended learning, flipped classrooms, accessible technology integration, and online learning - to name only a few (Humphries, Williams, & May, 2018; Lee, Yang, & Zuilkowski, 2019; Coubergs, Stryven, Vanthournout, & Engels, 2017; Spring, Graham, & Hadlock, 2016; Hwang, Lai, & Wang, 2015; Azhar & Iqbal, 2018; Wang, Moore, Roehrig, &

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Park, 2011; De Paepe, Zhu, & Depryck, 2018). However, the data on teacher perceptions only reflected their work in physical classrooms.

In California, in early March 2020, TK-12 teachers were given two weeks to shift their teaching from face-to-face (F2F) to online education. Districts were not prepared for teachers, originally trained to work with their students F2F, to suddenly transition to remote online teaching in compliance with a federal quarantine. Health restrictions and community lockdowns literally pushed teachers into online delivery systems *beyond their own learning experiences* and *into their students' homes*.

This quickly crafted *digital curricula* presented novel, even mind boggling, challenges for teachers. Learning barriers became painfully evident as students moved online (Mustafa, 2020). No longer were teachers able to meet all of their students' needs mandated in the IEPs. Support services for students were nonexistent or clumsily adapted to home environments. Student collaboration and interactions during cooperative learning (Gillies, 2016) and project-based learning (Kokotsaki, Menzies, & Wiggins, 2016) were put on hold until students returned to school. Teachers reshaped their instruction for the new medium of video conferencing.

Teachers have viewed technology as a tool, now; it is their *lifeline* to their students. This paradigm shift created a dissonance between (a) what teachers had come to expect in teaching and supporting students with special needs (i.e., onsite special services), and (b) the reality of what they are now called upon to do (i.e., online teaching minus onsite special services).

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, educators in higher education are left with the dilemma on how to prepare their teacher candidates for this new type of classroom. The evidence-based strategies used in the traditional model must be integrated with virtual learning. According to Burbules (2009),

> "Virtual" learning environments need to be understood not primarily in relation to technologically based "virtual reality" experiences, but as immersive learning places in which creativity, problem solving, communication, collaboration, experimentation, and inquiry support a fully engaged experience. These "places" are virtual not by virtue of any kind of "synthesized" reality, as that is normally understood, but in relation to dynamics of interest, involvement, imagination, and interaction that support an active engagement between a learner and a learning environment.

Teacher preparation programs need to train candidates to adjust overall to the ever-changing circumstances. There is also a dire need to integrate multiple elements of educational technology into the candidates' classes. Information technology and educational technology systems are both readily available in higher education. But how can teacher preparation programs maximize them to prepare student candidates to translate F2F classrooms to virtual learning environments?

Methods

Online survey instruments have grown exponentially since the start of the pandemic, and we designed a six-open-question questionnaire to appraise perceptions about teacher preparation programs challenges to prepare special education teacher candidates for this new reality, as they struggle to help their students meet their IEP goals. The research methodology employed is a mixed methodology approach, where the researchers analyze the survey answers both qualitatively by coding the text into themes, and quantitative, by calculating statistics of the themes that were identified in the respondents' answers. In addition, data from weekly

synchronous guided discussions with candidates (new teachers, who just finished their licensure courses and are completing their practicum together with completing the last two courses of their special education programs - Master of Arts and Master of Education), provide further insights regarding experiences and challenges teaching remotely during the pandemic. Data collection occurs concurrently with data analysis and through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding - culminating into a formal framework (Charmaz, 2003). An Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, together with a University Provost Office approval have been achieved prior to survey distribution.

Data Sources

The participants in this study are all involved in special education teacher preparation programs in a currently multi-state private non-profit university: (1) teacher candidates (new teachers) enrolled in online courses; (2) master teachers, who mentor teacher candidates in the classroom; (3) teacher aides or paraprofessionals, who work closely with teacher candidates and classroom teachers to deliver education to the TK-12 students; (4) university faculty teaching courses in the two teacher preparation programs; and (5) candidate teacher supervisors, who guide the teacher candidates' experiences and their professional identity.

Data collection instruments include an online survey of six questions, and open discussions during synchronous class sessions with candidates enrolled in culminating courses of two special education programs (Master of Arts in SPED and Master of Education in SPED). The mode of distribution of the online survey entails distribution via email to all participants. This survey is (a) anonymous; (b) confidential, as the data will be reported only in aggregated form; and (c) completely voluntary, not affecting their evaluation on any level. The total number of respondents that completed our survey was 95 participants (N=95).

Results

When asked about what challenges did the new teachers encounter when addressing IEP goals for their students, 22.5% of respondents said that they feel they successfully met the target IEP goals; 18.75% confessed that teacher training would have helped them meet their students' IEP goals; student participation (access to online services – 13.75%) and student engagement in distance education (12.5%) were identified as impediments to meeting IEP goals. When asked about which challenges teachers met with when simply delivering content to their kindergarten to grade 12 students, the respondents identified the following issues as paramount: access to technology and internet (28.5%), student engagement (21.5%), student participation (16.67%), and lack of teacher training (14.3%). When asked if they believe that teachers are meeting the needs of their students with special needs during distance learning, the respondents responded that: yes (36.4%), no (30.1%), they are doing their best (19.3%), and that some needs are met (10.2%).

When asked how did the district (i.e., inspectorat) help the new teachers to shift to the online delivery, the respondents answered that 40.5% received online training, 19% received no training, and 17% received district-specific training. When asked who supported the new teachers in planning and delivering the content, 25% of participants responded that their district and their university collaborated to teach them how to deliver that content, 12.5% responded that university supervisors helped them with the transition to online education, and 11.25% received support from collaborating with other teachers and administrators from their district. For the last question of the survey, the majority of the respondents reported that the new teachers achieved

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successful online modifications and accommodations via one-on-one online instruction (28%), via small group work online (24%), and by using the flexibility of the Zoom platform (21%).

Conclusions and Discussion

The results of this study provide relevant and current information regarding the impact of Covid-19 on special education service delivery in the USA. Second, the study brings attention to the field of teacher preparation programs to integrate the empirical-based teaching traditional model with the virtual learning in such a way to produce effective "pandemic teachers" or "crisis teachers" that would know how to navigate the remote teaching circumstances imposed by taking shelter from a highly contagious airborne virus. Third, based on these results, administrators and policy makers have to consider changes to accommodate this paradigm shift to better serve students with disabilities, a matter of educational equity and social justice. The overall scholarly significance falls under the umbrella of taking action as an educational responsibility to provide the students with disabilities with opportunities for growth and prevent a possible developmental regression. In the same time, as education providers, the post-secondary educational institutions are taking seriously the equality for the special education teachers they are preparing, as these teachers have to do double duty (or more) to coach the parents, make special accommodation packets, maintain individualized contact with the parents, etc., in an effort to maintain education as normalized as possible.

The perceptions of SPED teachers' self-efficacy regarding meeting the needs of students with an IEP, remained strong in terms of their perceptions of service delivery and compliance with the IEPs. These perceptions depended on the degree of support received from school districts and institutions of higher education (IHEs). The respondents who completed the teachers' survey reported a sense of concern regarding service delivery, students' low level of participation due to lack of parental support, and the issue of digital inequalities (as this issue became evident within the context of digital learning).

The degree of school district support directly impacted the level of sense of self-efficacy of teacher candidates who served as interns. Many interns received support from university mentors and supervisors, and, along with supportive school districts, these teachers perceived that they were able to stay in compliance with the IEPs. The degree of school district support varied across the state and there was a strong relationship with the level of socio-economic resources available.

The degree of accommodations and modifications were limited to 1:1 and or small group instruction. This was related to the teacher preparation programs which do not address teaching online in the programs and the school districts had to provide professional development in a very short time as they shifted from face to face to online format.

Since the rigidity of traditional teaching is no longer possible, flexibility to adjust to the (relatively) new state and federal health regulations and to digital learning will impose a move to a student-centered education. Master-level special education programs need to be prepared to meet these needs in the teacher preparation reality.

The following points of necessary change should be considered when distance learning is used to deliver educational services to students with special needs:

1. Integrating varied technology into teaching practices and in educational delivery is a must. Training new teachers to effectively use this technology decreases the level of frustration and the efficacy of teaching strategies.

2. Collaboration of SPED teachers and school personnel during this pandemic is essential. Expanding resources provided to teachers while providing support (such as modelling of teaching strategies, sharing of experiences, sharing ideas and materials, etc.)

3. Changing the strategies of making accommodations for students with Individual Education Plans and in delivering educational services to students with special needs.

4. Find ways to better transition the new teachers from traditional education service delivery to a digital format so that they can fulfill their educational responsibility for their students.

5. Identify ways to decrease frustration related to how the teachers perceive they meet the needs of their students.

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