Narrative Inquiry of Early Career Teachers’ Experiences Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kinsey Ann Wright

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Narrative Inquiry of Early Career Teachers’ Experiences Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kinsey Ann Wright

Dissertation submitted to the College of Education and Human Sciences at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Special Education

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Key Words: narrative inquiry, special education, early career teachers, pandemic, COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Narrative Inquiry of Early Career Teachers’ Experiences Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kinsey Ann Wright

This study utilized narrative inquiry to learn the stories of early career teachers of students with disabilities as they navigated teaching during a global pandemic. Five early career teachers participated in a series of three semi-structured virtual interviews. Interviews were transcribed then analyzed using a six-phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nine themes were identified: Teaching, Communication, Parents, Special Education, Workload, Resources, Training and professional development, job satisfaction, and teacher preparation. Themes were organized and presented to answer the research questions of the study. The findings contribute to understanding pandemic-related challenges faced by early career teachers of students with disabilities. Implications for teacher preparation programs as well as P-12 districts are discussed.
Acknowledgements

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Kimberly Floyd, and my committee members, Dr. Sharon Hayes, Dr. Alexandra Hollo, and Dr. Carla Meyer: Without your support, encouragement, and feedback, this dissertation would not have been possible.

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To Bridget Green and Amy Olson: I am so incredibly fortunate to have you both in my life. Your support and friendship throughout my dissertation process, as well as life in general mean so much to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To Morgan Chitiyo: Thank you for all the years you spent building up my confidence. Your mentorship, support, and calm guidance have been invaluable to my professional development. Thank you for believing in me, for pushing me out of my comfort zone, and for
giving me opportunities I otherwise would have not considered. And thank you for gently nudging me to pursue doctoral studies.

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To my many friends and colleagues who have supported me along the way: I am so fortunate to be surrounded by so many who love, support, and mentor me. Thank you all.
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Narrative Inquiry of Early Career Teachers’ Experiences Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In January of 2020, the world began to learn about a mysterious virus known as COVID-19, and by March of 2020 most of the United States was under stay-at-home orders. This order drastically impacted all educational settings. When it became evident that in person classes would not resume for the remainder of the Spring 2020 at the P-12 or university level, in person classes quickly transitioned to online delivery. This sudden shift of education delivery modality created challenges for teachers at all levels. As a university instructor and teacher educator, I experienced challenges too. Shortly after stay-at-home orders were issued, I began to receive emails from former students, current teachers, asking for advice about teaching in a virtual P-12 environment. The common themes in these emails were inadequacy and lack of training, feelings I was experiencing too.

My own struggles to teach during a pandemic combined with the struggles of my former students caused me to wonder if anyone was talking to teachers about their experiences during this time. How did they feel about the sudden delivery shift? What did they feel like they were doing well, and conversely, what were they struggling with? I quickly realized, as a teacher educator, it was important to learn from their stories to make teacher preparation programs better. The seed for my dissertation topic was planted.

This study’s aim is to learn the stories of early career teachers of students with disabilities as they navigated teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study examined the challenges faced by these early career teachers, their personal and professional growth, the effects of teaching during COVID-19 on future practice, and how special education teacher preparation programs can be updated to reflect the lessons learned during COVID-19.
Literature Review

Today, special education teachers are expected to have a broad range of competencies in working with students with a variety of disabilities, in a variety of settings, collaborating with a variety of professionals, working in a system of multi-tiered systems of support, and being technologically savvy (Leko, et al., 2015). Traditionally, special education services have been provided in person at P-12 schools, however given the explosive growth in the online delivery of P-12 education in recent years more special education services than ever before are being provided in virtual settings (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2019; Carnihan & Fulton, 2013). Despite growth in online P-12 education, preservice and inservice teacher training in online pedagogy is lacking (Moore-Adams, et al., 2016; Barbour & Harrison, 2016). When the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an emergency remote shutdown and changes to pedagogy and practice for the 2020-2021 school year, teachers faced challenges providing compliant special education services to students with disabilities (Stelitano et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers faced immense amounts of stress and burnout as a result of teaching during a global pandemic (Kotowski et al, 2022; Pressley, 2021; Kim et al, 2022).

Teaching Special Education Online

Education at a distance is not a new concept in P-12 education. Online delivery of instruction for P-12 students has increased in the past decade with enrollment increasing at a rate of 6% annually (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2019). From 2005-2009, Carnahan and Fulton (2013) found a 114% increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in an online school and 94.69% of these students with identified disabilities participated in the general education classroom. Other studies showed students with disabilities enrolled in online schools learn and achieve similarly to their peers who do not have Individualized Education Programs.
(IEPs) and students with IEPs did not show significant differences in number of minutes logged into online classes or final grades in the courses studied (Allday & Allday, 2011; Liu & Cavanaugh, 2012). It has also been reported online learning has made access easier for students with disabilities because students receive more individualized feedback in online environment, increased student motivations, and access to a wide variety support tools available in online not always available in traditional instruction (Marteny & Bernadowski, 2016).

However, the amount of training teachers receives to teach in virtual environments, either in their teacher preparation program or through professional development offered by the district they are employed in, is lacking (Moore-Adams, et al., 2016; Barbour & Harrison, 2016). Additionally, teacher perception of their knowledge, skills, and ability to integrate technology have an impact on whether or not they choose to use the technology they have available to them (Ertmer, 2005). Educating students with disabilities in an online environment presents unique challenges for teachers, and training is lacking (Rice, 2017). Some difficulties teachers face when teaching students with disabilities in online environments are making the curriculum accessible, providing adequate support to students with disabilities, availability of support staff, funding, delivering accommodations in an online environment, and providing quality special education services (Burdette, et al. 2013).

In a study of 80 online P-12 teachers, Marteny and Bernadowski (2016) found mixed results on teacher ability to implement IEPs in online settings. They found that 53% of teachers surveyed said it was easier to implement IEPs in online settings, whereas 36% of respondents said it was harder. Additionally, 28% of teachers surveyed felt they were not able to adequately meet students’ IEPs or 504 plans. Rice and Carter (2105) reported that teachers worried about the inaccessibility of the online curriculum for students with disabilities. Teachers stated online
school may not be appropriate for all students, especially not students who were younger and had emotional disabilities/behavior concerns (Rice & Carter, 2015).

When examining in-service teacher training for special education teachers, Crouse, et al. (2018) interviewed six teachers who taught for online schools and focused on educating students with disabilities in an online context. All teachers interviewed reported they received no direct preparation in online teaching during their teacher preparation program. Additionally, all of the teachers who were interviewed felt they were proficient in online teaching, but they were not prepared to teach online when they accepted their online teaching position. Each teacher participated in regular professional development offered by their schools. Overall analysis of the findings showed that six teachers interviewed learned a lot about teaching students with disabilities through learned practices. With the growth of online P-12 education, teachers should be minimally equipped to provide instruction in virtual environments; however in this sample, it is clear that none of the teachers interviewed received training in online instruction during their teacher preparation program.

In another qualitative study, Rice and Carter (2015) interviewed online teachers, case managers, and special education administrators about supporting students with disabilities in online schools. The research team invited 26 special education professionals, who either taught or were involved in some facet of teaching students with disabilities in online schools, to participate in a semi-structured interview. The researchers found that overall participants knew teaching online presents unique challenges, but many of the professionals interviewed approached problem solving as they would in a traditional school or classroom. Teachers viewed their roles around three ideals: ensuring course completion by monitoring, conveying curriculum, and building and maintaining relationship; however, each worried about the prepackaged
curriculum being inaccessible to students with disabilities (e.g., difficulty administering accommodations such as extended time, lack of differentiation). Local level special education professionals viewed their roles as leveraging disability knowledge with policy knowledge and spent much of their time engaging in conflict resolution, policy enforcement, and advising students. Conversely, schoolwide professionals who were responsible for much of the policy and oversight of special education programs expressed concerns that online schools might not be appropriate for all students with disabilities, especially those who were younger and had emotional disabilities or other behavior concerns.

Teachers often receive little instruction or professional development in teaching online (Smith, et al., 2016). Crouse, et al. (2018), studied teachers who teach students with disabilities in an online setting, all reported they were required to use a prepackaged curriculum and had limited ability to differentiate beyond instructional groupings. Teachers from that study additionally reported they were not prepared to teach online when accepting their online teaching position; however, with training and professional development offered by their schools as well as experience, they felt proficient after some time.

**Effects of COVID-19 on teaching students with disabilities**

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread to the United States. Due to the severity of the COVID-19 virus, most states took unprecedented steps to mitigate the spread of the virus by enacting statewide quarantine orders. These quarantine orders forced the closure of most P-12 schools in the United States, amounting to 124,000 public and private schools that serve over 55 million students (Education Week, 2020). In response to closure orders, school districts and their teachers transitioned to virtual learning on short notice to minimize interruptions to schooling for their students. Concerning students with disabilities, the United
States Department of Education remained clear that despite pandemic-related disruptions, schools were still obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students with identified disabilities (United States Department of Education, 2020).

In a mixed methods study of special education teachers and school-based special education specialists, Hurwitz et al. (2021) investigated the effects of the pandemic on individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and on teacher ability to implement evidence-based practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative data analysis found respondents reported more difficulty tracking progress on IEP goals, and more difficulty responding to challenging behavior. Further, participants reported changes had to be made to IEPs in response to the pandemic (e.g., modalities of service delivery, number of service minutes, parent delivered interventions, student absence related accommodations). Despite changes made to IEPs, teachers reported the least restrictive environment did not change for over 75% of students on their caseload due to the reporting mechanisms within their counties. This research team also found teachers modified the types of materials they used for instruction (e.g., individual materials versus shared) and utilizing materials that were easy to sanitize. From the interviews with the participants, the researchers found four prevalent themes to support their quantitative data (i.e., education in a pandemic is an overwhelming challenge, serving students in a pandemic requires more innovation and adaptation, renewed importance on collaboration with colleagues, contrasting student responses to virtual instruction).

A survey of over 1500 teachers conducted by the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation in the fall of 2020 also focused on teachers of students with disabilities during the pandemic (Stelitano et al., 2021). From their analysis, 38% of teachers reported their school districts offered instructional options for students with disabilities (e.g., offering in person
instruction to students with disabilities prior to this option being available for students without disabilities); however, this was less likely in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools and schools with a majority of non-white students. They also found that remote instruction gave teachers the opportunity to work with students with disabilities in one on one or small group settings as much as or more than teachers teaching in different instructional modalities; however, students with disabilities receiving their instruction remotely or in a hybrid environment demonstrated lower assignment completion compared to students attending school in person. Data analysis also showed that 60% of teachers felt less confident in implementing IEPs in a remote educational environment compared to an in-person environment. Based on these results, the authors recommended prioritization of in person learning experiences for students with disabilities, training and preparation for teachers to work with students with disabilities, and a focus on evidence-based practices designed to accelerate learning.

Effects of teaching during COVID-19 on teachers

Teachers experienced high levels of stress, burnout and negative effects on their wellbeing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kotowski et al., 2022). Pressley (2021) conducted a survey of 359 P-12 teachers in the United States and identified several factors related to teacher burnout (i.e., anxiety related to COVID-19, teaching, parent communication, support of administration). This study did not note significant differences based on teaching assignment, teacher ethnicity, teaching modality, or number of years of teaching experience.

Similarly, Kim et al. (2022) examined the mental health and wellbeing through a series of four interviews with a sample of British teachers between April 2020 and November 2020 (Kim et al., 2022). They found teacher mental health and wellbeing improved after the school year ended, but negative impacts on mental health were seen once school resumed. The research
team also identified several job demands (i.e., uncertainty, workload, the negative perception of
teachers, concern for others, personal health, needing to work in multiple roles) and job
resources (i.e., social support, work autonomy, coping strategies) contributed to reduced mental
health and wellbeing.

**Justification for the study**

Teachers were asked, on short notice, to provide high quality instruction to their students
from a distance very quickly (RAND, 2020). Changing delivery modalities required teachers to
change the way they teach, rely on resources they might not have adequate access to, and use
systems they had to learn as they used them. When schools reopened for the 2020-2021 school
year many teachers were teaching some students online and some students in person. This was
particularly challenging for teachers of students with disabilities. Teachers are known for their
creativity, adaptability, and willingness to try new things, but the COVID-19 pandemic stretched
everyone in unanticipated ways.

The purpose of this study was to learn the stories of teachers of students with disabilities
as they navigated teaching during a global pandemic. This study used Narrative Inquiry to learn
these stories. This study is significant in several different ways. First, this study learned to learn
about the thoughts, feelings, emotions, successes, and challenges that P-12 teachers of students
with disabilities faced and continue to face related to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Second,
this study has the potential to inform teacher education.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were the major challenges for educators teaching students with disabilities in P-12
   schools during the COVID-19 global pandemic?
2. In what ways did teachers of students with disabilities change personally and professionally during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

3. How can knowledge gained teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic inform future practice?

4. How can special education teacher preparation be changed as a result of lessons learned during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

Method

The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of P-12 teachers of students with disabilities as they navigated teaching during a global pandemic. The methodological approach chosen for any study should be appropriate and driven by the topic being studied (Patton, 1990; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Qualitative methodology was chosen due to its unique ability to examine the experiences of individuals in a rich way. Rather than focusing on large samples of participants and drawing statistical inferences, qualitative methodology focuses on the experience of the individual (Patton, 2002).

Specifically, the proposed study utilized Narrative Inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives explore “the way humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Humans are inherently storytellers who share learning and experiences of life through creating and sharing stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narrative research “looks backward and forward, looks inward and outward, and situates the experiences within place” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 140). The overarching goal of the narrative inquirer is to analyze, interpret, and retell participant stories (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Narrative inquiry was most suitable for this study.
because it allowed me to explore how five early career teachers of students with disabilities experienced teaching during a global pandemic.

The study aligns with the social constructivism paradigm or the belief that meaning is constructed as opposed to found (Crotty, 1998). The primary goal of research aligned with the social constructivist paradigm is seeking out the perspective of the participant(s) perspective and how the participants understand the world around them, with the understanding that individual understanding is subjective and varied (Creswell, 2014). Researchers approach the study by looking for meaning through participant views and experiences (Creswell, 2014).

**Role of the researcher**

In qualitative research, data collection happens because of interactions between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The researcher is the primary instrument for both data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2014). I am a special education teacher educator who works at a university in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Prior to being a teacher educator, I was a high school special education teacher. I maintain a special education teaching license. Additionally, while I no longer teach P-12 students with disabilities, I did continue teaching preservice teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study is of personal interest to me because I know and taught all participants during their teacher training program and have remained in contact with most since their graduation. Additionally, I experienced my own struggles in the transition to emergency remote teaching in the spring and grappled with the complexities of the planned flexible instruction during the 2020-2021 school year as well as continued COVID-19 related challenges in the 2021-2022 school year. Finally, I am interested in learning about things teachers learned and continue to learn during this experience, sources of frustration, and whether they felt prepared to do this as a way
to inform my future pedagogy as a teacher educator. My role in this study was to collaborate with the participants by listening, asking questions, and sharing my own experiences.

**Context**

The participants in this study represented a purposeful sample of a targeted group of individuals who represent the topic of interest. Participants in this study were recruited from graduates of the same teacher preparation program. Prospective participants were contacted initially via email address or direct messages (e.g., through social media, text). The initial contact explained the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria for participation and asked prospective participants to respond within one week if they were interested in learning more and would like to participate. Two follow-up recruitment messages were sent to prospective participants who had not yet responded.

Teachers with five or fewer years’ experience teaching students with disabilities, either as a special education teacher or as a general education teacher who teaches in an inclusion classroom (i.e., teaches students with disabilities), were selected for this study given that they each graduated from the same institution within the same curriculum and instructors. Therefore, I knew their teacher preparation training were closely aligned with each other. Participants were eligible to be included in the study if they taught in a special education classroom or inclusive general education classroom as a teacher of record during the 2019-20 school year and 2020-21 school year. Participants were excluded from the study if they were employed outside of the field of education or were employed as a teacher in a virtual school.

In total, 20 prospective participants who taught at a variety of grade levels, in different types of schools (e.g., public, private, charter), and in different settings (e.g., rural, suburban, urban) were contacted about participating in this study. Ultimately four of the 20 teachers who
were invited met inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. The final participant, a graduate not originally solicited due to not having two years full time teaching experience, is connected with me on social media and frequently shares anecdotes about teaching on the social platform. I reached out to her and she enthusiastically agreed to participated in the study. Participant interviews were conducted in the order participants agreed to participate.

I have an existing relationship with each participant who ultimately agreed to participate in this study. Each participant enrolled in one or more classes I taught during their teacher preparation program. After completing their teacher preparation program, I remained in contact with three of the five participants through social media, and periodic zoom conversations with one. Participation for all participants was solicited through emails provided on their program exit survey.

**Participant Profiles**

**Simone.** Simone is a 27-year-old biracial female in her fourth year of full-time teaching at the time of the interviews. She has been employed with the same school district; a small suburban school district located in the Appalachian region of the United States. She has taught at the same school all four years, and the school mirrors the population of the district. Her current teaching placement is as a special education teacher, however, she also spent one year teaching kindergarten and one year teaching first grade. In addition to her full-time teaching experience, she was a substitute teacher for one year. She taught remotely from March 2020 until the end of the school year. In the 2020-2021 school year she taught remotely for the first quarter and then in person for the remainder of the school year. Simone has a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, a master’s degree in special education, and is certified in general education PreK-4 and special education K-8 and 7-12.
Lauren. Lauren is a 26-year-old white female in her fourth year of full-time teaching experience at the time of the interviews. She has been employed by the same school district, an urban school district located in the Appalachian region of the United States with an incredibly diverse student body and many economic challenges since began her teaching career. The specific school Lauren works at is unique because the neighborhoods it draws its student population from are one of the most affluent and one of the poorest areas of the city. Her current position is as an intervention teacher and the remainder of her teaching experience was at the first-grade level. She taught remotely from March 2020 until the end of the school year. In the 2020-2021 school year she taught remotely from the beginning of the school year until May and then in person for the remainder of the school year. Lauren has a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, a master’s degree in special education, and is certified in general education PreK-4 and special education K-8 and 7-12.

Beth. Beth is a 26-year-old white female in her fourth year of full-time teaching experience at the time of the interviews. She has been employed by the same charter school corporation located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Her charter school corporation is considered an alternate educational placement for students whose behavioral needs are not met in the general education setting of a traditional school. The student body she teaches is very diverse and economically disadvantaged. Beth has taught at two different schools in her charter school corporation, and has taught in a combined kindergarten and first grade classroom all four years she has been a teacher, and one of those years, she was also the building special education coordinator. She taught remotely from March 2020 until the end of the school year. In the 2020-2021 school year she taught remotely for the half of the year and then in person for the remainder of the school year. Beth holds a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and
has taken additional coursework to earn special education certification. She holds a general education certification in PreK-4 and a K-12 special education certification.

**Ruth.** Ruth is a 25-year-old white and Asian female in her third year of full-time teaching experience at the time of the interviews. Her first year of teaching was spent at a private religious high school teaching 9th grade English, her second year of teaching was at a private school for students with behavior disabilities at the middle school level. Her first two years of teaching were in an urban area in the Appalachian region of the United States. She taught remotely from March 2020 until the end of the school year. In the 2020-2021 school year she taught remotely for the first two weeks of the school year and then in person for the remainder of the school year. Ruth holds a bachelor’s degree in Secondary English Education and a master’s degree in Special Education. She holds teaching certifications in Secondary English grades 7-12, grades 4-8 English Language Arts, and Special Education 7-12.

**Morticia.** Morticia is a 22-year-old white lesbian identifying female in her second year of full-time teaching experience at the time of the interviews. She has been employed as a 5th grade teacher in the same school district for both years. Her district is located Appalachia and is currently under receivership by the state. Morticia’s school district represents socioeconomically disadvantaged student body. She taught remotely from March 2020 until the end of the school year. In the 2020-2021 school year she taught remotely for the half of the year and then in person for the remainder of the school year. Morticia earned a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and holds general education teaching license in PreK-4 with a 5th-6th add on license.

**Summary table of participant information.** This table provides a snapshot of participant information.

| Table 1 |
Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ruth</th>
<th>Morticia</th>
<th>Beth</th>
<th>Simone</th>
<th>Lauren</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Mar 2021</td>
<td>Jan 2021</td>
<td>Oct 2020</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Setting

Interviews were conducted remotely on the Zoom video conferencing platform. Zoom was chosen specifically because it has the capacity to host the interviews, record the interviews to a secure cloud for downloading, and provide an auto-generated transcript of the interviews. The researcher is an experienced Zoom user and has institutional access to the platform. Conducting interviews in a virtual environment also allowed me to recruit participants from outside of my local geographic area. Additionally, at the time of the interviews, safety protocols had to be considered due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual interviews required no in-person contact and therefore eliminated the risk of either participant or researcher contracting the virus.

Morticia, Beth, Lauren, and Ruth completed all three interviews at their homes. Morticia and Ruth preferred their interviews to be later in the evening (e.g., 8pm), Lauren arranged her interviews at dinnertime (e.g., 6pm), and Beth scheduled her interviews to take place as soon as
she got home from school (e.g., 4pm). Simone completed all three interviews in her classroom immediately following the end of the school day. I completed all interviews with all participants from my home office. This location was chosen because it was more comfortable for me, limited the potential for distractions, and allowed more flexibility with scheduling.

**Data Collection**

Interviewing is a useful tool when the purpose of the inquiry involves studying a past event which cannot be replicated (Merriam & Tissdale, 2016). Further, interviewing allows the researcher to access phenomena that cannot be observed such as thoughts, feelings, perspectives, and experiences (Patton, 1990). Interview questions should be clearly worded, appropriate, and adequate to explore what the topic of the study is (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). For the purpose of this study, I utilized semi-structured interviews which included structured questions and included general questions about the topic being studied (Merriam & Tissdale, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were used to encourage participants to discuss their experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interview with a set of questions, however follow-up questions were asked to clarify or to pursue a line of questioning based on something contained in a response. Individual interviews with each participant were conducted and recorded remotely using the Zoom platform.

Seidman (2006) describes the importance of in-depth interviewing as “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). He describes the necessity of a three-interview series, with the first interview focusing on life history (e.g., giving context to the participant’s experience), the second interview focusing on details of the experience (i.e., experiences related to the topic of study), and the third interview focusing on reflection and meaning (e.g., making meaning of the experience) (Seidman, 2006). This study
utilized the three-interview series as described by Seidman. The first interview focused on participants providing context for their experiences by sharing about teaching before COVID-19 and during the emergency remote shutdown. The second interview focused on experiences teaching during the 2020-2021 school year, and the final interview focused on making meaning of the experience of teaching during COVID-19.

Separate question sets were developed for each interview. Question sets contained 10-12 questions each. All participants were asked all questions, however since interviews were semi-structured, questions may not have been asked in order, and question sets were supplemented with additional questions or lines of inquiry based on participant responses. Question sets contained 10-12 questions. Three interviews were conducted with each participant for a total of 15 interviews. Data collection for this study took ten weeks and interviews lasted on average 65 minutes. Interview question sets can be found in Appendix One.

Interview data was collected during three interviews with each participant for a total of 15 interviews. The first interview focused on the emergency remote shutdown. The second interview focused on the 2020-2021 school year. The third interview focused on lessons learned while teaching during the pandemic and collecting demographic information. Data collection for this study took ten weeks. Interviews lasted on average 65 minutes. Dates each participant was interviewed are listed in Table 1.

The audio transcription feature of Zoom was used for initial transcription of all interviews. Once transcripts were auto-generated by Zoom, the researcher reviewed and corrected errors. Participants were asked to self-check their interview transcripts and make corrections, provide clarification, and identify parts of the interview they did not wish to be included in the final transcript. Once participant self-checking was complete, transcripts were
deidentified to protect participant identity as well as the identity of the schools and the school districts. Transcription of interviews began immediately at the conclusion of each interview, and subsequent interviews were not scheduled until interviews had been transcribed and checked by the participant.

**Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis are a simultaneous process in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). For this study, Thematic Analysis was used to analyze data. Thematic Analysis “is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set, allowing the researcher to “see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57).

Thematic analysis was chosen due to its accessibility and flexibility, namely data can analyzed in different ways (e.g., the entire data set, one particular aspect), its suitability for novice qualitative researchers, and its ability to “give voice” to the data (Braun & Clarke). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe a six-phase approach to thematic data analysis: 1) familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing potential themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

The first phase, familiarizing yourself with the data, is the process of becoming intimately familiar with your data and making casual notes about your observations (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To become intimately familiar with my data, I listened to the audio file of each interview twice, writing down thoughts or topics I thought may pertain to my research questions. Next, I downloaded the text file transcript of each interview from Zoom and made corrections to create a full transcript of each interview. Finally, I read each transcript and took casual notes.
The second phase, gathering initial codes, involves the systematically coding the data, or identifying and labeling “features of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 61). During this phase, I printed off a hard copy of each interview, underlined information I thought to be potentially relevant to my research questions, keeping a list of my codes in a separate document. Next, I read each transcript again and assigned a color to each code. At this stage, I changed or combined several codes to better represent the data. Once I was satisfied with the codes I developed, I transitioned to phase three.

The third phase, searching for themes, is the active process of reviewing codes and grouping similar codes together to form themes and sub themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). At this phase, Braun and Clarke (2012) urge the researcher to think about how themes are related and tell the story of the data. In this phase, I grouped similar codes together to form themes. For several themes, I created a theme and then several sub themes. At this phase, my doctoral advisor, who had also read all interviews and coded the data, and I met to discuss and negotiate codes and themes.

The fourth phase, reviewing potential themes, involves reviewing the entire data set to determine if the themes convey the most relevant parts of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During this phase, I listened to the audio recording of each interview again to ensure my themes matched the data. The fifth phase, defining and naming themes, involves describing each theme in each theme in a few sentences, selecting representative quotes from each theme, and then describing to the reader how the theme connects to the research question(s) (Braun & Clarke). During this phase, I connected each theme to one of my four research questions, selected quotes to use for each theme, and interpreted those quotes. The final phase, producing the report, tells
the story of your data (Braun & Clarke). For this study, I chose to organize themes by research question and tell the story of the data in that manner.

**Ethical considerations and Data Security**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at West Virginia University. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants signed a consent form indicating they understood the study and agreed to participate. Participants had the option to opt out of the study at any point with no explanation and no ramifications. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting of this research. All participants were legal adults capable of making decisions for themselves and were not considered to be a member of a vulnerable population.

Interviews were recorded on Zoom to a secure cloud. Once recordings are available in Zoom’s cloud-based storage, the recordings as well as transcripts, were downloaded and stored in Box, a cloud-based storage platform, which is only accessible to me by using my institutional credentials, including two-factor authentication. Access to the Box folder containing deidentified data was given to one person, a doctoral trained researcher and second reviewer. Finally, as an added protection against data loss, all video files were downloaded to a password protected external hard drive which was stored securely. Transcripts in digital format, digital scans of consent forms, and my researcher journal will be kept for five years following final approval of my study.

Finally, participants reviewed transcripts of the interviews they participated in, my analysis of their interviews, the final write up of this dissertation, and will be invited to review any publications submitted from this dissertation.

**Trustworthiness**
The goal of qualitative research is to understand the phenomenon of interest, not replication or application to other cases or situations. In narrative research, “the narrative researcher is concerned that the story or narrative is recognizable to the participant storyteller and illustrative of the storyteller’s experience (Lapan, Quartaroli, Riemer, 2012). To demonstrate trustworthiness in a researcher can demonstrate methodological rigor (Merriam & Tissdale, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

**Credibility**

Credibility attempts to answer the question of “how congruent are the findings with reality” (Merriam, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is the most vital factor to ensure trustworthiness. To establish credibility, the following strategies were used.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. To establish credibility in sampling, the researcher selected participants who she considered to be “information rich” (Patton, 1990, p. 169), which was appropriate for Narrative Inquiry. All participants met inclusion criteria and were willing to participate by sharing their lived experiences surrounding teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Member checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). All participants were asked to review their interview transcripts, make corrections, provide clarification, and validate the accuracy of the transcript. Four of the five participants reviewed and approved their interview transcripts with no changes or suggestions. The fifth participant asked me to remove one 12-minute block of her second interview, because after reading and reflecting on that part of the conversation, she wished it to remain confidential. I understood and agreed with the participant and removed this section of the interview, first because the participant asked, and second, this section of the
interview was from a tangential line of questioning with limited relevance to the study. Additionally, each participant reviewed the final narrative for accuracy. All five participants approved the final narrative. Two participants expressed their appreciation for being given a space to share their experiences, and a third participant expressed that she was glad to reconnect with me. Throughout the study, I had ongoing conversation with my dissertation chair who provided peer review and scrutiny, as well as brought in different perspectives. This strengthened the overall study. Additionally, all codes and themes were reviewed, negotiated, and agreed on with my dissertation chair.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) as cited in Merriam & Tissdale (2016), introduced the idea of transferability, which they noted “the burden of proof lies less within the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original Inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but appliers can and do” (p. 298). They note that in order for transferability to be possible, the researcher should provide “sufficient descriptive data” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). To promote transferability thick, rich descriptions were used. Thick rich descriptions describe the participants, settings, and findings in great detail such that a reader will be able to determine if results can be transferred (Merriam & Tissdale, 2016). In this study, participants, timelines, locations, and teaching placements are all described in detail. Additionally, descriptions of findings were enhanced by quotes from participants. Purposeful sampling is utilized when the researcher’s objective is to understand and learn from a specific group of people, so selects participants they can learn from (Merriam & Tissdale, 2016). For this study, I selected participants who represented a range of teaching experiences and diversity, but also a sample that I had a previous relationship and knew about
their teacher preparation program. Participant characteristics are described in detail in the method section of this article.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to interpretation and recommendations of the study which are supported by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure dependability in this study, I reported detailed information about the study design, how participants were recruited, details about the interviews and interview questions, and through the use of my own reflective practices in a journal. Additionally, my doctoral advisor examined the methodologies to ensure all aspects of the study were appropriate.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability focuses on objectivity, and establishes that findings are derived from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure conformability, I kept a detailed audit trail (Merriam, 2009) in my journal and described procedures for interviews and data analysis are described in this article.

**Summary**

This section described the methodology used to carry out this study. The purpose of this study was to learn from the experiences of P-12 teachers of students with disabilities as they navigated teaching during a global pandemic. Specifically, from a social constructivist view, I used narrative inquiry to learn and tell participant stories. Using virtual interviews, I conducted three interviews with each of the five participants in this study. The first interview focused on emergency remote teaching early in the pandemic, the second interview focused on the 2020-2021 school year, and the final interview focused on lessons learned and demographic questions. All interviews were semi-structured, took place on Zoom, and were recorded and transcribed.
Interviews were analyzed using the six-phase approach to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006. Trustworthiness was discussed in the context of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Results**

After a process of coding and recoding interviews and grouping codes into themes, nine key themes were identified in the data. The nine themes are: teaching, communication and decision making, parents, special education, workload, resources, training and professional development, job satisfaction, and teacher preparation. Descriptions of each theme are found in Appendix Two.

**Themes aligned to research questions**

Using the four research questions for this study as a guide, themes were aligned to each research question. Themes as they aligned to each research question are reported in detail below.

*What were the major challenges for educators teaching students with disabilities in P-12 schools during the COVID-19 global pandemic?*

After data analysis was complete, six of the nine themes addressed the challenges the five participants in this study faced. They experienced challenges related to: teaching, communication and decision making, parents, special education, workload, and resources. Four of the five participants spoke of challenges related to parents and all participants reflected on the remaining six themes answered this research questions.

**Teaching.** The four participants who taught in person for at least part of the 2020-2021 school year spoke of in-person teaching challenges. Challenging aspects included monitoring things such as student mask wearing, and keeping track of where all students were at all times during the school day to assist in contact tracing as necessary, and changing their teaching
methods to allow for social distancing during in person teaching. Ruth shared, “It was definitely space as far as challenges go. Like where you have to sacrifice your pedagogy and your beliefs, for their safety, because you have to. That was my biggest challenge.” Also related to changes to teaching methods for in person instruction, Simone reflected, “There was a lot of struggles… I feel like their attention was so hard to get, especially because we don’t have manipulatives and fun ways to learn. You can’t do partner work you can’t do teach it to one friend and another friend goes and teach it like you couldn’t do any of that.”

All five participants described challenges associated with virtual instruction. They identified issues such as insufficient materials or resources, not having background in or knowledge of how to teach in virtual environments, and challenges providing small group or independent work in groups with their students. Simone described her experience teaching online, “It's so much harder to teach online when you've never done it before. So, it's like do we keep the same curriculum? How do we adapt it? Like it was we were still trying to figure out things along the way. You don't know how to teach it online or how it's going to look online. And then, it was what materials, do I have to send home. So, it was a lot of flying through the air. So, it was a lot of trial and error, I guess, you could say.”

Also related to teaching in a virtual environment, Lauren also shared, “I think where kids struggled was we couldn't do small group. Because only way to do that on Teams was like sending them out to like a breakout room which then they're like by themselves. But if I did want to pull a small group, it was very hard, because my only options were to send the students who didn't need extra support completely offline”

Interestingly, Ruth, who taught high school students, experienced challenges associated with virtual instruction, but did not seem to struggle as much. She shared, “It's not really any
different teaching online versus teaching in person, as long as your WIFI is good. Like good teaching practices are good teaching practices and they should be transferable.”

All participants indicated student independence (e.g., ability to complete instructional tasks independently) was a challenge they faced. I expected student independence to be a challenge for Beth, Lauren, and Simone since they teach kindergarten or first grade; however, Morticia and Ruth indicated this was a challenge for them as well in areas such as staying on task and turning in work.

Lauren and Simone both shared the struggles related to their students being able to independently manage materials and tasks. Lauren shared, “These kids have no independence, because mom or dad or whoever was at home held their hand the whole time. Where at school, it would be okay ask three before me, or let's do some group work, or why don't you figure it out, first, if you can't come back. It wasn't like that at home for these kids. They have no concept of how to try, on your own or work independently at all. Or even know how to struggle at all.” Beth reflected on her students who struggled with independence because they did not have the skills to be independent. She shared, “It was horrible because my most of my kids can't read. They're all lower than their grade levels, so that was the other thing, where all of the other teachers could say, all right, do this online assignment, go to this. My kids can't read, they can't type their words, they can't do this. Yeah, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy.”

Morticia and Ruth worked with middle and high school students but still experienced students struggling to be independent learners. Ruth expressed one influence on her students’ ability to be independent was their home environment. Morticia described her students working independently in breakout rooms as, “Breakout rooms were another failure. We had to stop those within the first month of school because I can't be in all the breakout rooms at once, and then we
had kids who were being inappropriate and I was getting phone calls from parents, where were you when this happened, I was in another breakout room.”

**Communication and decision making.** All participants spoke of challenges related to communication and decision making. Each reported they were able to communicate with their co-workers with relative ease. Communication with parents varied widely, even in the same classroom. Some participants reported parents were in constant communication and some parents were virtually unreachable. All participants indicated they wished there had been better communication from their districts (e.g., finding out information at the same time as parents or from parents). All participants further expressed they were given little to no input on decision making and policies.

Morticia and Simone worked in school districts requiring students to use their webcam. Despite district policy both chose not to make cameras mandatory in their classes. Simone cited sensitivity to students who did not want their peers to see their home environment. Morticia reflected, “We were required to require the students to have on cameras. I wasn't a stickler for it. In my evaluations, they were like you have below average cameras. I wasn't a stickler for it because my thing is you're participating if I do I didn't random attendance checks. And if I did random attendance check in you didn't participate, you get a call… I’d rather have kids being engaged and off camera than on camera and not.”

Simone and Lauren expressed communication with their districts was challenging. Lauren shared extensive logistical challenges related to her district distributing materials and communication related to these challenges. Simone spoke of administration creating policy without asking teachers for input, “But it's you know admin supporting us in the right ways. I mean they always throw things at us and they never asked for our opinion, I always thought it
was funny that, like all these directives come from people who never even sit down in the classroom. When they say you know you're not allowed to touch a child, do you know that no one in elementary or no one in kindergarten can tie their shoe so is that violating or like they've never even. It's just the directive that we get it doesn't like we don't get a say we don't get a say we're told to do what we have to do, and you know really going to say.”

**Parents.** The effect parents had on the early career teachers who participated in this study was the part of this research I found most surprising. I understood parents had to be there to support their children’s learning; however, the effect it had on participants was surprising. The parents’ presence left the participants in this study feeling watched, judged, impacted their instruction, and it hindered teachers forming relationships with their students.

Lauren, Morticia, and Simone spoke of the difficulty having parents present at all times. Lauren’s quote illustrates the challenges of her and her colleagues, “I think the parents always being there was the worst part of online learning to be honest. Being watched 24/7, I felt like I couldn't be my normal self and kids got away with more because, what am I supposed to do? Yell at your kid in front parents? Not that I normally yell it's just like I felt like I couldn't. It was like being observed, like having an observation like by your principal, but by 20 parents. And I think it also limited the depth of the relationship I could build with the child. So, I think it kind of like prevented the student really showing their true self. Their parent was right there to like cut off, being their voice and hands for them a lot of the time. So, I think that was like honestly, one of the hardest the hardest parts of it all.”

Lauren went on to share as a result of the pandemic, she worked hard to create boundaries with parents. She shared, “I know my first year of teaching I was that teacher who would answer you 11 o'clock at night because I just to please everybody. Parents are not easy to
deal with. Setting a boundary for myself of like okay, like my class dojo or my talking points app is done when the school day is done. I think this year kind of made me like put more into perspective, like what needs to be done what's most important you know setting boundaries for myself, because just personality wise like in part of my like anxiety is I’m a people pleaser like I don't want people to be mad at me I don't want people to be frustrated with me.” Simone and Beth spoke of creating boundaries as well.

**Special Education.** Special education was an area of this study where I was hoping to get more data than I actually did. All participants spoke of doing the best they could when it came to providing special education services (whether they were a general education teacher or a special education teacher), however all admitted despite their best efforts, they probably were not fully compliant. This varied from Simone sharing because parents were given options to do virtual or in person instruction and were given the opportunity to change their mind, IEP revisions often lagged several weeks behind the newly chosen instructional modality. Morticia shared there were not enough special education teachers or related service providers at her school to support students with disabilities and these responsibilities fell on the shoulders of general education teachers who were already dealing with incredibly large class sizes due to general education teacher staffing shortages. In terms of providing services outlined in the IEP, all participants but Ruth indicated there was some difficulty providing services, and often how well special education services were provided depended on parent involvement due to special educators being stretched so thin and students likely did not get the amount or quality they would have in person.

When asked if she felt she was able to adhere to student IEPs, Simone shared, “No. No. No. Actually, I’m kind of glad, not glad, but I was not a special education teacher at the time, and that was happening when the transition was happening. But our special ED team had to
rewrite all of the IEPs to make sure that they’re SDIs we’re accommodating at home. But if it wasn't for that I don't think, and I mean with the assignments every teacher posted something different, and I don't think that IEPs were in the first thing in their mind like oh I need to follow that like that was not what we were thinking about that time. I really think like truly in my heart that we really did do the best we could.” Reflecting on adherence to student IEPs, Beth’s experiences were similar to Simone’s.

Lauren described special education teachers and service providers as being stretched thin. She shared, “I feel like they were spread really thin so the quality of those services might not have been as much as they would have gotten in person. and like I said a lot of the things that they might have had to do you can't really do online. They would have pulled like tons of different manipulatives and really did hands on learning and things like that you know our special ED teacher usually comes in and does that were a little bit trickier this time around, or even like physically taking them out of the setting of you know, school.”

Both Morticia and Lauren spoke of long wait times for a child to be assessed for special education eligibility. The experiences of both of these teachers is illustrated by this quote from Morticia, “I had a lot of kids who were awaiting evaluation… I put it in the system and they are still waiting.”

**Workload.** All participants found the 2020-21 school year frustrating. Frustration stemmed from district policy, parents, students falling behind, intense workloads, staffing shortages, and being in what Simone called “survival mode”. All five participants reported effects on their mental health (self-reported anxiety and/or depression) saying things like “it was a horrible year emotionally” and “it was like that meme where that dog is sitting in the house on fire and is like this is fine”. Two participants, Morticia and Beth, indicated they had effects on
their physical health in addition to effects on their mental health. Regarding her mental and physical health, Beth shared, “I lost 30 pounds and I didn't have 30 pounds to lose. It was insane. I’m very over all of it. It was horrible last year emotionally I was kind of a wreck. Mental health wise I think everybody struggled with that at least a little bit last year. Just because of the amount of stress. Emotionally and mentally, I was so stressed and drained. It was hard to be what I needed to be for the kids and for the staff. Almost like pouring from an empty cup I guess is the best way I can explain that.”

All participants spoke of increased stress as well. Simone shared the following anecdote about the stress of the school year, “I feel like when I’m at work, my stress level is high. I also feel like being in special ED your stress levels always high because you’re like oh this IEP this RR oh this meeting like it's always constant.”

**Resources.** All participants spoke of how lack of resources created challenges for them. Student internet access was an issue for all participants except Ruth. Simone and Lauren’s districts made mobile hotspots available for students who needed them whereas Beth and Morticia’s districts encouraged families to utilize free internet service offered by local internet service providers. In terms of materials, Simone, Morticia, and Lauren all spoke of having to redesign materials not designed for virtual instruction to suit their needs. Simone and Beth also spoke of challenges related to materials in the classroom (e.g., not having a class set of manipulatives); while Beth and Lauren spoke of students not having access to the hardware they needed for virtual instruction (e.g., tablet, laptop). Morticia’s students had the devices they needed, but her district previously received a grant to provide ChromeBooks. Finally, all participants reported using their own money to purchase necessary tools and supplies. Lauren reported “spending thousands of dollars” because she had to buy a new laptop that could support
virtual teaching because her district supplied a computer that was too old and slow and Beth reported buying software programs with her own funds. Desperate for materials, Morticia even set up a Donor’s Choose to solicit donations for her virtual teaching.

Lauren and Morticia shared their students did not have access to devices, as illustrated by Morticia’s comment, “Most of my kids are very poor we are 100% free and reduced lunch, actually free lunch, we were able to secure grants. That made it so that every kid we were one to one district. Every kid got a Chromebook. Without those Chromebooks this never would have worked, because most of the kids did not have access to technology, some of these kids it was the first time that they had to mess with technology.”

**RQ2- In what ways did teachers of students with disabilities change personally and professionally during the COVID-19 global pandemic?**

After data analysis was complete, two of the themes addressed personal and professional growth. These themes were: Training and professional development and job satisfaction. All five participants provided reflections for both of these themes.

**Training and professional development.** Each of the five participants spoke about professional development offered by their district. Simone and Ruth reported their professional development was meaningful and helpful. Lauren and Morticia shared their districts offered professional development but it was not useful to them. Beth was the only participant to report her district did not offer any professional development.

Regarding her district’s professional development, Simone reflected, “When we had that shut down, the emergency shut down, we were off for two weeks, and then the next week after that the whole week we had trainings. We had trainings we had Zoom trainings, Google Classroom trainings, (regional special education assistance center) came in and showed us things
that we can do. We had trainings like unbelievably. So, I did learn a lot through that time, but it also was different when you go to try it yourself, because we weren't together as a team to say oh, I figured this that like it was just a lot harder, but we did have a lot of training and I do feel like we were prepared in a in a sense.” In contrast, Beth shared, “In terms of my own school and professional development. They didn't do anything. They didn't tell us how to kind of recover from COVID or do a lot of check ins or anything like that. It was more like all right, we got through it so let's just get into gear for next year.”

Beth indicated she sought out professional development over the summer, which was about the effects of trauma on the brain. Beth reflected on the experience, “I did one and it was fantastic. That's something that I paid like $500 to attend, not something that the school did for us. But it was incredible a lot of them kind of spoke on all different aspects of it in terms of like what's happening emotionally with the kids and how this is kind of categorized as a trauma that everyone's been through which physically alters the brain which not a lot of people realize.”

Ruth took a class as part of her master’s program. Morticia spoke of studying for a licensure exam to add additional grade bands on to her teaching license but did not seek out formal professional development. Lauren and Simone did not seek out any professional development opportunities on their own, with Simone succinctly summarizing her summer as “I didn’t do anything in the summer. Not a thing. I literally needed a break, I was done. “

Quite possibly the most interesting piece of data was each of my five participants sought out informal professional development using social media platforms. TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook were all mentioned as platforms the participants learned techniques they were able to apply to teaching. For example, Lauren spoke of learning to create a bitmoji classroom as well as a group for teachers using Schoolology on Facebook. Simone leaned more towards TikTok
where she learned about popits and other “fun things she wouldn’t have thought of on my own.” She described social media as “When it’s on social media, I feel like it relates to your students more because it’s current.”

**Job satisfaction.** All five participants expressed frustration with the job. Frustration was wide ranging and included everything from lack of administrative support, to parents, to lack of resources, to pay, to perceived lack of respect by the public. Ruth stated “teaching is the only job where strangers on the internet tell you that you’re doing it wrong and how you should be doing it.” Simone talked about the influence of the pandemic on her views of the job, “I loved my job I loved every part. Everyone was happy and now it's like everyone's complaining about everything. And I don't know, I mean I love teaching, but in a pandemic, I do not. I don't want to say that I don't love teaching, because I do, and this is exactly what I want to do, but. This is not what I expected it to be.”

Beth spoke candidly about her future in education as well. She shared, “I’m kind of done with putting in all this effort and just being continuously shut down or told you're not doing enough or parents and politicians like, why are we paying teachers this much, but then on the teaching side like. We're not getting paid enough period like we are all struggling to pay bills, especially those of us who are like single households like. So, it doesn't excite me anymore, and that frustrates me because I love working with kids and I love teaching and I loved what I did. But it's not the same anymore.”

Participant responses to questions asking if they’d teach next year, in five years, and in ten years were sobering. Of the five participants, only Morticia was certain she would stay in education, and she has aspirations of moving into an administrative role. Lauren thought she would probably continue to teach but it probably wouldn’t be in her current district. Similarly,
Beth would like to continue to teach stating, “I would like to think that in five years I will still be teaching if things are different. I would hope, better for teachers after this whole pandemic thing and realizing that there are a lot of teachers that are done with it at this point and if so, many teachers are done then something's wrong. The emotional hardships and mental stress is draining, it's not worth it.”

**RQ3: How can knowledge gained teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic inform future practice?**

Interestingly, none of the participants were able to articulate how what they learned during the pandemic will influence their teaching practices in the future. Despite this, all participants shared they believe online learning is likely here to stay in some form, though each expressed this wasn’t necessarily a good thing. Lauren’s words reflect the other participants in this study, “I hope learning through a screen doesn’t last because I don’t think it worked. It worked for some, maybe, but I don’t think it worked at all for my school district.” Simone shared she has become more adaptable than she was before the pandemic. She shared, “We’re immune to it now. We just expect the unexpected. That’s it.”

Not necessarily related to their own practice as teachers, all five participants reflected on their experiences through the lens of what they wish parents and the general public knew. Lauren articulated the sentiment of her peers by saying, “We’re trying our best. Teaching is something that you don’t do for any other reason than you love it. You have to, or you wouldn’t do it.” Three of the five participants pointed out that schools are not adequately staffed. Simone described staffing at her school, “Staffing is an issue in this pandemic. Not having subs and being short staffed is a big part of this pandemic that people don’t understand.”
RQ4- How can special education teacher preparation be changed as a result of lessons learned during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

Participants struggled to provide concrete suggestions they believe would improve teacher preparation programs and benefit future teachers. All participants identified online or virtual teaching as an area that was not included in their teacher preparation program. Morticia said, “Nobody taught us how to teach online, because nobody expected us to have to teach online.” And Lauren said, “I never learned how to create a full teachable lesson via computer. I mean, at least, that I remember. Which at the time you think you'd ever need to unless you taught cyber school?” However, all participants indicated they took at least one instructional technology class and they were able to use strategies from that class when teaching online. Lauren and Beth indicated they thought instruction in behavior management techniques was lacking, and Simone, Morticia, Beth, and Lauren disclosed they did not feel like they received enough preparation in working with families as well as other professionals. Beyond content related to online teaching, behavior management, and working with parents, there was no clear consensus on things that should be added to teacher preparation programs.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to learn the stories of early career teachers, specifically teachers of students with disabilities, as they navigated teaching during a global pandemic. Specifically, this research examined the challenges teachers of students with disabilities faced, personal and professional growth of these teachers, how what was learned during COVID-19 can inform future practice, and how special education teacher preparation can be changed based on the lessons learned during COVID-19.
The analysis of the data showed all five participants faced challenges related to virtual instruction and four of five participants faced challenges associated with in-person teaching, the fifth participant did not teach in a virtual environment during the time period that was the focus of this study. They each faced challenges related to students being able to complete basic tasks independently (e.g., put crayons in a box after using them). These early career teachers also shared communication with parents and districts were challenging at times and all expressed they did not have input on district policies. Every participant spoke of challenges associated with parents, with some challenges being related to parents were difficult to reach and other struggles with participants feeling like they were under constant supervision. Finally, each participant spoke of frustration given the challenge of providing services to children with disabilities and feeling they did the best they could but it may not have been enough. All participants indicated the remote shutdown had an adverse impact on their mental health. Finally, all participants spoke of challenges related to resources necessary to teach, from needing to purchase a new computer for work use to having to adapt materials that were not meant to be used in a virtual space.

On a positive note, the analysis of the data also indicated each participant grew personally and professionally during the pandemic. Participants spoke of training and professional development, though some received training through their districts and some did not, some sought out formal professional development and some did not. Interestingly, each participant shared that they relied on the use of social media platforms for professional learning (e.g., how to make bitmoji classrooms) and support from other teachers. A herculean task was asked of teachers when they were asked to transition to virtual teaching for the emergency remote shutdown, and again when they were asked to manage different instructional and safety protocols the next school year. The participants in this study showed remarkable creativity,
tremendous growth, and the ability to adapt quickly in response to changing conditions. In spite of the challenges they faced, participants in this study handled the situation remarkably well!

All participants in this study were feeling frustrated with or apathy towards teaching at the time of data collection. Frustrations were wide ranging and included not feeling valued by administration, parents, or the general public, frustration with legislation about and funding for P-12 education, frustration with school and district policies that take time away from teaching (e.g., paperwork), lengthy waits for special education testing, and overall compensation. Of the five participants, only one was certain she would be teaching in five years.

Potentially due to continuing to live and teach during an ongoing pandemic and not truly having time to reflect and process their experiences, the early career teachers in this study struggled to articulate how what they learned during COVID-19 will inform their future practice. Similarly, participants struggled to articulate what changes they would like to see to teacher preparation programs beyond broad suggestions. Broad suggestions offered by participants encompassed strategies for maintaining student engagement in virtual environments, pedagogy of virtual teaching, working with paraprofessionals in both in person and virtual environments, and in trauma informed teaching. These suggestions can be incorporated into teacher preparation programs to benefit teacher candidates currently in the pipeline and future teacher candidates.

These findings contribute to understanding some of the challenges early career teachers of students with disabilities faced during the emergency remote shutdown and the 2020-2021 school year which were impacted by COVID-19. The teachers who participated in this study did a phenomenal job teaching their students despite challenges with communication, resources, parents, and more. The teachers who participated in this study, along with teachers around the world, should be commended for their work during the pandemic.
Implications for Practice

From this study, it is clear that P-12 teacher preparation programs need to incorporate methods and coursework related to teaching in a virtual environment as well as strategies and techniques for providing services to students with disabilities in a virtual space. All participants in this study reported no specific courses in the pedagogy of teaching in a virtual environment. Virtual instruction is likely here to stay (e.g., virtual learning days due to inclimate weather) so it is imperative that the next generation of teachers are prepared to teach in both in person and virtual spaces. Institutions of higher education should consider incorporating a virtual teaching component into teacher preparation programs to supplement the in-person student teaching experience. Additionally, the teachers who participated in this study suggested more coursework on working with parents and families, working with paraprofessionals, and trauma informed practices be added into teacher preparation curriculum.

There are implications for P-12 school districts as well. School districts must do a better job at soliciting input on decision making from their teachers and taking steps to improve communication. As mentioned previously, the participants in this study did not feel they were given a voice about district policies, changes, and how and when information was disseminated. Districts can also work to provide teachers with the resources and professional development they need to be effective in the classroom. All participants in this study reported challenges with resources and four of the five participants reported professional development opportunities offered by their districts were not useful or were only minimally useful. Additionally, districts should take steps to promote wellness among their teaching force and investigate the possibility of providing counseling services to teachers as an example.
Both teacher preparation programs and school districts can collaborate to provide better mentoring and support programs for early career teachers, beyond first year induction programs. These programs could potentially reduce the stress, frustration, and burnout associated with the job. Additionally, institutions of higher education and P-12 schools could provide access to professional development on topics related to teaching but not instruction (e.g., working with families, trauma informed practices, accessing resources, promoting health in the workforce).

This study revealed implications for policymakers as well. Topics such as teacher stress, burnout, and attrition combined with stagnant salary growth and changes to benefits and pensions have an established research base, but the pandemic further exasperated these issues. Teachers, both new and experienced, are leaving the field of education and the pipeline of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs is shrinking. Policymakers should pass legislation focused on improving salary and benefits for teachers, a more robust and less complex system for student loan forgiveness, providing teachers with adequate resources to do their jobs, and improving overall working conditions. These things may promote longevity in the field and attract new teachers to the field.

Limitations and Future Research

The participants in this study are graduates of the same teacher preparation program and identify as female so it is possible that graduates of different teacher preparation programs may have responded differently as well as those who do not identify as female. It is also possible that had participants represented a broader range of grade levels the results may have been different. Additionally, the sample lacked geographic diversity, with four of the five participants teaching in the same geographic area. The participants were interviewed by a former professor which may have influenced their responses. Finally, a limitation of this study is the participants were asked
to reflect upon an experience they are still in the midst of and may not have had the chance to fully process and make sense of their experiences.

Future research could follow the five participants who participated in this study to see if their reflections on COVID-19 change with more time to process the trauma of living and teaching through a pandemic, and if they stay in the field of education. Future research could also explore the research questions used for this study with a larger participant pool representing a broader range of teaching assignments, levels of experience, and geographic areas, particularly since more time has passed and teachers have more distance from the 2020-2021 school year.

Since one of the interesting and unexpected findings in this study was teacher use of social media for professional development purposes, future research could also explore the influence of social media on teaching practices.

In addition to studying teachers, additional stakeholders (e.g., administration, parents) could be interviewed about their perceptions and experiences. It may also be worthwhile to study educational leadership training for administrators to determine if their training equipped them to lead during a pandemic and what their takeaways are. Finally future research could track changes teacher preparation programs and school districts make to better equip and support teachers.

**Conclusion**

This study shines a light on broader issues in the field of education and special education. The early career teachers who participated in this study bravely shared their stories and experiences about one of the most difficult experiences they’ve faced professionally. By learning these stories, faculty in teacher preparation programs examine curriculum and make changes based on feedback from these early career teachers. Leaders of school districts can focus on
providing robust professional development and wellness programs for teachers. Learning from teachers and implementing their suggestions may be one way to keep them in the field.
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Appendix One

**Interview 1 Questions**
1. How are you? What have you been up to since graduation?
2. Tell me about your teaching position.
   a. How long have you been in this role?
   b. Were you in the same teaching position in both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school year?
   c. Do you teach students with disabilities?
3. What are your favorite parts about teaching in this role? What are your biggest challenges?
4. Can you describe your work-life balance before covid?
5. Thinking back to your teacher preparation program, describe any instruction about teaching online you received?
6. Tell me about your teaching when you were asked to transition to emergency remote teaching in March 2020? What things do you believe you did well? What things do you feel like you struggled with?
7. Describe any support you were given to help with this transition.
8. Tell me about your feelings about teaching during the early stages of the pandemic?
9. How did your students do? Students with disabilities?
10. Do you feel like you were able to adhere to student IEPs?

**Interview 2 Questions**
1. Tell me about any professional development you engaged in over the summer, either offered by your district, formal instruction you sought out, or things you took the initiative to learn independently to become a better teacher.
2. Thinking to returning to school for the 2020-21 school year, can you describe the safety protocols your district put in place for both students and employees? How did you feel about these safety protocols?
3. In the 2020-21 school year what do you feel like you did well? What did you struggle with?
4. Describe instructional strategies worked well. Describe instructional strategies that did not work well. Describe strategies you used with students with disabilities.
5. How did your students do? How did your students with disabilities do?
6. Did you work with students who received related services? If so, how did the students receive their services?
7. How did your instructional strategies differ before COVID and during COVID?
8. Describe the level to which you were able to adhere to student IEPs?
9. Describe the level of collaboration you experienced in the 2020-2021 school year?
10. Describe your work-life balance while teaching during covid. Did your work-life balance progress as time went on?
11. What did you learn about yourself as a teacher? As a person?

**Interview 3 Questions**
1. If you could transport back to March 2020 and give yourself advice, what advice would you give and why would you give this particular advice?
2. What would you like to tell people who aren’t teachers (e.g., parents, politicians, the general public) about teaching during COVID?
3. Knowing everything you know now (e.g., things you’ve learned about teaching during COVID), what do you think should be added into teacher preparation programs?
5. Is there anything that we haven’t already talked about that you’d like for me to know?
6. What gender do you identify with?
7. What are your preferred pronouns?
8. What is your racial or ethnic identity?
9. How old are you?
10. How many years full time teaching experience do you have?
11. When I transcribe this interview and report results, I will protect your identity by using a pseudonym. Would you like to choose your own pseudonym? If so, what is it? If not, that’s ok, I’ll pick one for you.
12. So I can report demographic data for the district and school that you work for, what district do you work for and in what building? I will not report the names of your district or schools, rather I will report only the demographic variables of your school to paint a picture of the population you work with.
Appendix Two

Definitions of Themes

**Teaching.** Teaching referred anything related to the act of teaching students (e.g., in-person instruction, virtual instruction, student independence).

**Communication.** Communication and decision making referred to anything related to how decisions were made and how information was communicated (e.g., district to families, district to teachers, communication between colleagues, communication between teachers and parents).

**Parents.** The parents theme referred to anything related parents, broadly defined to mean any person with legal decision-making authority for a child in the classroom (e.g., parent involvement, parent boundaries, messaging to parents).

**Special Education.** Special education referred to anything related to the provision of special education services (e.g., compliance, services provided).

**Workload.** Workload referred to tasks completed as part of the job and feelings related to tasks completed as part of the job (e.g., frustration, mental and physical health).

**Resources.** Resources referred to those things were needed to teach, including accessing the necessary resources (e.g., access, materials, technology, things purchased by teachers).

**Training and professional development.** Training and professional development referred to any activity a teacher engaged in to build their professional skills (e.g., district offered professional development, self-sought professional development, social media).

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction referred to any thoughts or feelings related to satisfaction achieved through teaching (e.g., frustration, overcoming, plans to stay in the profession).
Teacher preparation. Teacher preparation referred to feedback the participant’s teacher education program (e.g., gaps, content to add).