Understanding Being a Special Education Teacher in the Era of COVID-19: Teacher Perceptions Two Years In

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Understanding Being a Special Education Teacher in the Era of COVID-19: Teacher Perceptions Two Years In

Amanda N. Walkup

Dissertation submitted to the College of Applied Human Sciences, School of Education, at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Special Education Personnel Preparation

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Abstract

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Amanda N. Walkup

The COVID-19 pandemic not only caused a disruption to the education of children, but has contributed to the ever-growing teacher shortage in the United States. In an effort to better understand the effects of the pandemic on special education teachers, this study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to explore the lived experiences of special education teachers in one southeastern state. Lived experiences of these teachers during the pandemic focused on “Frustrations Beyond Their Control,” “Unorganized Processes and Procedures,” and “Building Relationships.” Overall, participants were found to either languish in the ramifications of the pandemic on their schools and students, or to overcome those issues and blossom as a teacher, depending on their experiences and feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (concepts from self-determination theory). Policies and practices that districts can implement to assist teachers during and after future traumatic events are provided, as well as areas for future research.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my amazing husband, Will, who I am lucky to do life with every day. You are my rock and my hero. I would also like to thank our sweet furbabies, Ginger, Louise, Evie, and Pia. I could not have completed this without their love, support, and belly-rubs.
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Chapter I

Introduction

With the onset of COVID-19 and the struggles teachers have had to endure during this time, more teachers than ever are either leaving the field or being let go (or furloughed) by their districts (Diliberti et al., 2021). Between March 2020 and the start of the 2021 school year, approximately half of the teachers who left the field cited COVID-19-related issues as the reason for their departure (Diliberti et al., 2021). Traditional expectations of special education teachers changed as a result of the pandemic and related state and federal mandates. For instance, instruction shifted to virtual/online formats, parent meetings were conducted through video conferencing or over the telephone, and typical accommodations and services - such as speech therapy - were altered to be viable in the new virtual world. The increased workload and challenges that came with the move to virtual instruction created an additional obstacle to special education teachers’ abilities to persevere in the field (Diliberti et al., 2021). It is critical to understand how the pandemic has affected the daily lives of special education teachers so that mitigation strategies might avert the loss of special educators from the field in the future.

To more fully understand the pandemic’s effects on special education teachers, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of these individuals. Phenomenology is commonly known as the study of the essence of a given experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2019; van Manen, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Van Manen (2016) describes the essence of a phenomenon as the “very nature” of the event (p. 10). He continues to flesh out the idea of “essence” as the result of the researcher’s “uncovering” of the “internal meaning structures of lived experience” (van Manen, 2016, p. 10). The essence of a phenomenon is the fundamental meaning behind the experience being described as it was
lived in the moment of the experience, without the benefit of reflection and afterthought (van Manen, 2014; 2016).

The difficulty then arises as to how to delve into that deeper meaning behind the phenomenon as it was experienced at the time. Van Manen (2014; 2016) uses the term “lived experience” to delineate this moment in time when the experience occurred. It is through the subject talking through the experience, describing it in rich detail, that the researcher can formulate the essence of the experience (van Manen, 2014; 2016). The interview is one method researchers undertake to obtain this rich description of the phenomenon in question and is the method utilized in this study. Creswell and Poth (2017) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also point to the use of the interview as the main form of data collection for phenomenological studies. Conducting in-depth interviews with several subjects who have experienced the same phenomenon is a commonly used form of data collection within the phenomenological field, and will provide the best method for deriving the essence of the lived experiences of special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a particular impetus to collect this information as soon as possible during or after the event, as memories of lived experiences degrade over time. Developing an understanding of the lived experiences of special education teachers will assist in developing strategies aimed at increasing teacher retention as stakeholders will be better able to contextualize the importance of the work environment and related demands of special educators.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to illuminate the lived experiences of special education teachers before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By interviewing special education teachers from a variety of districts who worked pre-, peri-, and
post-COVID, using a semi-structured interview protocol, this study will attempt to thoroughly describe their lived experiences in an effort to better the state of the field as a whole. This study will explore various facets of the lives of special education teachers pre-, peri-, and post-COVID, including daily work expectation changes, health-related issues, and the overall toll of the pandemic on teachers. With this knowledge, stakeholders would be able to develop programs and/or implement changes to the field, such as altering working conditions or creating teacher health initiatives. Such new programming could serve to decrease overall teacher attrition rates over time.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are centered on how special education teachers describe their own experiences during this tumultuous time in education and how they have ultimately adjusted their work expectations and their lives in general.

1. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers pre-COVID (January 2019-March 2020)?

2. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (March 2020-June 2020 and August 2020-December 2020)?

3. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers post-COVID (January 2021-present)?

4. How have these experiences changed in regard to the day-to-day work expectations of special education teachers?

5. How have these changes affected special education teachers?

**Definitions**

*Pre-COVID (January 2019 - March 2020)*
The era of “pre-COVID” in this instance refers to the 2019 calendar year, which encompasses the Spring semester of the 2018-2019 school year and the Fall semester of the 2019-2020 school year. This time period also consists of the beginning of the 2020 calendar year, through March 2020 when the state schools were shut down due to the pandemic. This timespan was chosen as it was the closest to the beginning of the pandemic’s effect on education, while still providing a variety of typical experiences for teachers to draw from during the interview process.

**Peri-COVID (March 2020 - June 2020)**

The term “peri-COVID” refers to two disparate time periods. The first period is the remainder of the Spring semester of the 2020 calendar year. This encompasses the initial shut down of state schools and the implementation of virtual instruction. This time period was chosen as the “during COVID” stage as the most extreme and novel changes to the education system were experienced during this time.

**Peri-COVID (August 2020 - December 2020)**

The second time period considered “peri-COVID” is the Fall semester of the end of the 2020 calendar year. This period consisted of various measures by the state to bring teachers and students back into the school building for instruction. This time period was separated within the peri-COVID stage due to the shift from strictly virtual instruction to hybrid models of education.

**Post-COVID (January 2021 - present)**

“Post-COVID” refers to any time after January 2021. By this time, it is assumed that the necessary alterations to work expectations (virtual instruction and meetings, quarantine procedures for teachers and students, etc.) had been well-practiced and more easily embedded within day-to-day teacher life.
**Special Education Teachers**

Special education teachers are those who teach children with disabilities as defined in Section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Special education teachers can work in a variety of environments, including, among others, inclusive classrooms, resource classrooms, self-contained classrooms, or residential facilities. Special education teachers instruct students served by special education services under one, or more, categories as defined in the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

**Teacher Expectations**

Teacher expectations refer to the daily working demands of the job of being a special education teacher. In broad strokes, and in the researcher’s experience, typical demands of the position include instruction, differentiation, modification/accommodation implementation, assessment, professional collaboration, parental collaboration, and government-mandated paperwork.

**Theoretical Framework - Self-Determination Theory**

As defined by Creswell (2005), a theoretical lens is “a guiding perspective” (p. 599) that provides a framework in which to situate the study. This theory, or idea, is what guides the researcher through the study, structuring how they collect and analyze data and how they view the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As defined by Ryan and Deci (2000), Self-Determination Theory will be the theoretical framework for this study.

Self-Determination Theory investigates how people develop and maintain self-motivation in their daily lives (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It considers how self-motivation is affected by a person’s need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A feeling of
competence develops when a person feels that they are effective in their actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People who inherently feel as if they are “good at their job” are more likely to experience a sense of competence. Self-Determination Theory uses the term “autonomy” to refer to the feelings of “choice, volition, and freedom” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74). When these concepts are supported within a given situation, the person will experience a feeling of autonomy, being allowed to make choices and take actions without undue outside pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness is the feeling of belonging to, or being connected to, a group (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Martela and Riekki (2018) expanded upon the idea of relatedness as feelings of connection to others and the community.

Self-Determination Theory posits that the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are required for a person to develop and maintain self-motivation in any situation (Martela & Riekki, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory suggests that when self-motivation is not evident, one should examine how the person’s feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are being supported or thwarted (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by outside forces within their environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As far back as 1985, Deci and Ryan acknowledged that a teacher’s need for self-determination is regularly “undermined by institutional procedures” (p. 266). They discuss how a teacher’s self-motivation lessens when the policies and procedures of the workplace do not allow for self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Overall, it has been shown that a person’s mental well-being and performance in their environment increase when they report satisfactory feelings toward their own autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory will be used in this study as a method to organize the results. It is hypothesized that within the interview process, the subjects’ feelings of competence,
autonomy, and relatedness, or the lack thereof, will surface as underlying themes. The use of this theoretical lens provides a structure through which the researcher can narrow the results down to the very essence of the experience, which is the key tenet in phenomenology.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

There are three main limitations to the generalizability of the data gathered from this research. First, special education teachers are the sole focus of this study. Special education teachers are faced with different expectations than that of the typical teacher when it comes to their daily work lives, the student and parent population they work with, and the level of stress and burnout experienced. Focusing on this smaller group of teachers hinders the ability to generalize the findings of this study to the greater field of educators. As the goal of phenomenology is not to generalize the findings to the greater population, a narrow sample that meets the inclusion criteria is ideal.

Second, phenomenological studies inherently face the limitation of having a small sample size compared to the more common quantitative studies. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest the sample size of a qualitative study be flexible, starting with a minimum number of subjects but expanding until the point of saturation when no new information is being presented by the subjects. Mills and Gay (2019) state that having twenty or more subjects in qualitative research is rare, with the majority of studies using a smaller sample. Within phenomenology, the end goal is to fully explore the phenomenon in question, selecting participants who can most reflect the varying aspects of the experience (van Manen, 2016). Therefore, a small sample of 10 subjects was determined to be ideal for this study, allowing ample opportunity to richly communicate the subjects’ individual lived experiences while also providing enough substance to drill down to the overall essence of the phenomenon as a whole.
A third limitation exists in the sampling method used. Purposive sampling, or nonprobability sampling, is the standard method of sampling used within phenomenological studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select the ideal group of subjects from which the most relevant information will be gleaned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study endeavors to gather the lived experiences of a certain group of people (special education teachers) that worked in the field during a specific historical event (the COVID-19 pandemic) to understand how the event affected their daily working lives and their longevity in the field of education. This set of narrow inclusion criteria for the sample necessitates a purposive sampling technique.

**Ethical Issues**

All phenomenological studies must be concerned about possible ethical issues that could arise during the interview process (Mills & Gay, 2019). One such ethical issue is maintaining the confidentiality of the sample. When subjects are encouraged to speak openly about a topic, such as is the case with phenomenology, the confidentiality of their statements must be assured and protected (Mills & Gay, 2019). To ensure this confidentiality, the researcher assigned each subject a pseudonym during the transcription process. The list connecting the subjects’ names to the pseudonyms will be kept in a password-protected file on the researcher’s computer. All communications with the subjects will be kept separate from the transcripts and housed in separate document folders on the researcher’s computer, each also password-protected.

A second important ethical issue that often arises in phenomenological studies is the unwitting inclusion of personal biases on the part of the researcher (van Manen, 2016). For this study, the researcher is aware of areas of bias that could skew the results. First, the researcher has 20 years of experience teaching both K-12 students in special education and within a university’s
teacher preparation program. The researcher has often advocated for a redesigning of the demands placed upon special education teachers. Also, the researcher regularly advocates for better overall working conditions for all teachers, including compensation, mental and physical health care, and professionalization of the field.

Within phenomenology, the researcher attempts to set aside their personal biases through the process of bracketing (van Manen, 2016). Bracketing is when the researcher attempts to separate their biases from the subject by placing their own thoughts within brackets (van Manen, 2014). This process removes the researcher’s assumptions and biases from the discussion so they can focus solely on the subject’s interpretations of their lived experience (van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2016) stresses the importance of explicitly stating the researcher’s biases and assumptions through the research process to “hold them deliberately at bay” (p. 47) during the interpretation process. This is the method the researcher employed throughout the study to set aside personal biases and assumptions.

Summary

The researcher hopes that the results of this study will lead to positive changes in the lived experiences of special education teachers, their administrators, and the field as a whole. The exploration of the lived experiences of special education teachers during this time could lead to a better understanding of the mental and physical toll the pandemic has had on this group of educators. This may serve to develop a more well-rounded view of teachers as people, each with their own struggles and needs for maintaining their health.

The results of this study could also be significant to school and district administrators. Those in power cannot affect change if they do not have a deep understanding of the issues. The only true way to learn what the issues are is to talk to the people directly involved, working to
understand their lived experiences in ways that can translate into actionable changes. District and school administrators can directly alter the teacher attrition trend by understanding the problematic issues and implementing programs aimed at alleviating those issues.

Perhaps the most significant issue facing the field of education today is the increasing rate of teacher attrition (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Students, parents, teachers, and administrators would all benefit from more teachers staying in the field longer. This study proposes that it is only through a deep understanding of the lived experiences of teachers that the field as a whole will be able to alter its current direction. This study is undertaken with this goal of understanding the real worlds of special education teachers in order to educate the rest of the world in an effort to effect changes to the system.
Chapter II

Literature Review

The mental health of teachers worldwide has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Aperribai et al., 2020). Research has identified that experiencing a traumatic event has had profound effects on teachers’ mental health and emotional regulation, such as exhaustion and burnout (O’Toole, 2018). Burnout is typically described by overwhelming feelings of exhaustion, negative emotions, and ineffectiveness (Baker et al., 2021). Burnout has been shown to lead to higher rates of teacher attrition (Baker et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Thus, it is assumed that as feelings of burnout decrease in teachers, overall attrition rates will also decrease. As we continue to be uncertain about when school will return to “normal”, teachers and their administrators need to understand the mental health stressors the pandemic has brought about, as well as strategies that can assist teachers in bettering their well-being and avoiding burnout, which will hopefully lead to decreasing teacher attrition rates.

Pre-COVID Teacher Mental Health

It is evident that researchers were concerned about the mental health of teachers pre-COVID (Diliberti et al., 2021; O’Toole, 2018). Kidger et al. (2016) found that teachers were already at risk of experiencing poor mental health. Using measures of well-being (having positive feelings and positive functioning) and depression, teachers were found to have a mean well-being score four points lower than the average population and rates of depression more than twice that of the general population (Kidger et al., 2016). Low well-being and high depression can lead to high rates of educator absenteeism, in turn leading to poorer academic student outcomes (Kidger et al., 2016). Job satisfaction has also been shown to be one factor affecting burnout rates. In a study of university teachers, those with higher job satisfaction experienced
positive feelings and enthusiasm toward their work, leading to lower rates of burnout (Chen et al., 2020). Increasing positive feelings of well-being and job satisfaction can lessen feelings of depression and burnout rates in teachers.

**COVID-added Stressors**

However, as Helmke stated in 2020, “We cannot pretend this is an ordinary school year” (p. 36). In a qualitative study of teachers after a natural disaster, O’Toole (2018) discussed the added stressors that traumatic events pile on top of the normal emotional toll that teachers experience. Aperribai et al.’s (2020) findings also suggest that teachers are experiencing more stressors due to the pandemic than the normal stressors that typically come with family, work, and life. In Baker et al.’s 2021 study on the mental health of New Orleans teachers during the pandemic, the more stressors the teachers reported, the worse the teachers rated their overall mental health.

Increased stressors can lead to developing physical symptoms (e.g., fatigue, headaches, or muscle tension), emotional issues (e.g., anger, compassion fatigue, or distressing dreams), and interpersonal struggles (e.g., outbursts toward others, withdrawal, or substance abuse) (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). The isolation that has come with quarantine has added to the feeling of disconnect among teachers, which has been associated with poor well-being and high depression scores (Kidger et al., 2016). Findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey (Steiner & Woo, 2021) show that teachers, in general, are more than twice as likely as other workers to experience frequent stress and depression related to their job.

The need to quarantine due to being in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 has also resulted in higher numbers of absenteeism for both students and teachers from in-person classes, which negatively affects student academic outcomes since
students, or their teachers, are not present to participate in the instruction (Kidger et al., 2016). Most teachers were not educated in their preparation program to implement the type of virtual instruction that the COVID pandemic required, which can cause further detriment to their students’ ability to learn adequately and may increase the stress already experienced by teachers (Aperribai et al., 2020). In addition, COVID-related stressors can work to aggravate pre-existing mental health conditions in both teachers and students, leading to serious emotional issues and presentations, such as anxiety, insomnia, fear, and suicidal ideation, which had been previously controlled (Pera, 2020). These added stressors can lead to serious effects on teachers’ mental health, manifesting in their work and personal lives.

**Teacher Attrition**

Teacher attrition is an ongoing issue in the education field, resulting in numerous research studies focused on trying to identify the reasons professionals leave the field and to provide solutions to improve the situation (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Diliberti et. al., 2021; Embich, 2001; Schaefer et. al., 2014). The national rate of teacher attrition is commonly cited at 8% annually, with another 8% of teacher turnover, defined as teachers shifting schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Diliberti et. al., 2021). Southern states have tended to have higher rates of teacher attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), with this study’s focus state, South Carolina, having an attrition rate of 9.54% and a turnover rate of 2.79% from the 2020-2021 school year to the 2021-2022 school year (Garrett, 2021). For the 2021-2022 school year, South Carolina began the year with 1,063 vacancies out of 56,166 available positions, up from 699 vacancies at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, with the highest number of vacancies in the field of special education (162.5) (Garrett, 2021).
According to a report published by the RAND Corporation in 2021, about half of the teachers who left the field after March 2020 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States) stated that COVID was the main reason they were leaving (Diliberti et. al., 2021). Out of the almost 1,000 former teachers included in this survey, stress was the most frequently cited reason for leaving (Diliberti et. al., 2021). Diliberti et. al. (2021) found that, for some of these teachers, changing and increased work expectations, such as longer hours and virtual instruction, led to higher stress levels overall. EducationWeek, an online education-focused organization, noted that anecdotal evidence shows that a combination of declining working conditions and concerns over the COVID protocols and their health has factored into teachers’ decisions to leave the field (Lieberman, 2021). However, in a 2021 pilot study completed in South Carolina reporting the results of the exit surveys of teachers who were leaving the field, only 15% of leavers reported that COVID-related issues (such as instructional changes and health concerns) were the main impetus for leaving (SC-TEACHER, 2021). 75% of leavers attributed their departure to moving to another school district, retirement, personal reasons, overall dissatisfaction, or salary (SC-TEACHER, 2021). This report also noted that for about 10% of those teachers leaving, COVID issues served to make their current working conditions untenable, leading to their decision to leave (SC-TEACHER, 2021).

Within the studies referenced above, as is common in research into teacher attrition rates, teachers are provided with a pre-determined list of options to choose from to describe why they are leaving the field. This restricts a teacher’s ability to express their reasoning behind what is usually quite a difficult decision. Interview-based, exploratory studies would provide a more open environment for teachers to express the often complex reasoning behind their decision to leave. Likewise, if special education teachers were solely provided with pre-determined options
to choose from as to how their working conditions changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study would not be able to fully explore the many facets and complexities of their experiences.

Summary

As evidenced above, being a teacher, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, led to greater levels of stress, depression, and burnout than in other professions. The added stressors affiliated with COVID, such as virtual instruction and health concerns, served to exacerbate these feelings in the typical teacher. However, what is missing from the literature is a detailed description of how the act of teaching changed due to the pandemic, and how those changes affected teachers’ decisions to leave the field. While the surveys discussed in the literature review provided “stress” as an option for a teacher to choose, they do not describe what “stress” actually looked and felt like for the teacher. The goal of this study is to get at the heart of these experiences, provide rich examples of pandemic-teachers’ experiences, and explore how those experiences can affect a teacher’s ability to stay in the field long-term. As memories of lived experiences fade over time, there exists a particular urgency for this study to be undertaken so as to gather the most relevant and detailed information possible from the subjects.
Chapter III

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore and provide a rich description of the lived experiences of special education teachers before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By interviewing special education teachers from a variety of districts who worked pre-, peri-, and post-COVID, this study attempted to shed light on their lived experiences in an effort to better the state of the education field as a whole. This study explored various facets of the lives of special education teachers pre-, peri-, and post-COVID, including daily work expectation changes, health-related issues, and the overall toll of the pandemic on teachers. This chapter will discuss the research design and rationale of the study, describe the participant sample, provide an overview of the data collection instrument and procedures, and review the design method.

Design and Rationale

The research questions for this study were:

1. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers pre-COVID (January 2019-March 2020)?

2. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (March 2020-June 2020 and August 2020-December 2020)?

3. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers post-COVID (January 2021-present)?

4. How have these experiences changed in regard to the day-to-day work expectations of special education teachers?

5. How have these changes affected special education teachers?
This qualitative study attempted to answer these research questions through the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological method utilizing the hermeneutic circle focused on the lived experiences of the subjects uncovered through semi-structured interviews.

Educational researchers began to embed qualitative elements into their designs in the 1970s in an effort to explore the experiences from the perspective of the subject rather than the researcher (Creswell, 2005). One offshoot of qualitative research is phenomenology, which is associated with the philosopher Husserl beginning in 1970 (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As discussed in Chapter I, phenomenology is a method of research that makes use of qualitative information to explore the meaning behind events as they are lived by the subjects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It often includes a purposeful sampling technique, collecting data through interviews or observations, and expressing the findings through rich detail and description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an expansion of Husserl’s ideas developed by the researcher Heidegger (van Manen, 2014). Heidegger argued that phenomenology must involve interpretation on the researcher’s part in order to fully describe an experience so others can truly understand it (van Manen, 2014). He developed the idea of the hermeneutic circle, where meaning is derived from the whole (the experience as described by the subject) through the cyclical reference back to the individual parts (such as the actual words used by the subject) (van Manen, 2014). The researcher works to understand the experience as a whole, then digs into the individual parts, then relates those interpretations back to the original whole (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). It is through the repeated use of this cycle that the essence of an experience can be understood by the researcher and the public at large (van Manen, 2014).
The idea of lived experiences was developed by van Manen to more fully describe what the goal of phenomenology is - to illuminate the essence of an experience as lived by the subject (van Manen, 2016). The concept of “lived experience” requires that the meaning, or essence, of the experience is derived prior to the use of reflection on the subject’s or researcher’s part (van Manen, 2016). This can be achieved by returning to the original experience and describing it from different angles, from the inside (feelings) and the outside (events), while striving to avoid all explanations for those feelings or events (van Manen, 2016). As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) state, “phenomena…should be described before theorized, understood before explained” (p. 15). One must fully explore, describe, and understand the phenomenon in question before attempts can be made to explain it. Researchers must also employ bracketing, as discussed in Chapter I, to prevent their own biases and reflections from interfering with the hermeneutic circle of deriving the pre-reflective essence of the experience.

This phenomenological study utilized interviews about lived experiences, employing the hermeneutic circle, to develop a rich description of the essence of what it was like to be a special education teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Carolina. Phenomenology is the best method to answer the research questions as they are concerned with describing what the experiences were like, as opposed to, for example, measuring the number of different types of experiences as one would in quantitative methods.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were current and former K-12 special education teachers who taught pre-COVID and peri-COVID, with some still teaching post-COVID. Demographic information was collected during the sampling process in order to assure as much representation
and variation in the final sample as possible. (See Table 1. See Appendix B for the demographic break-down by participant.)

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics Among 10 Participants*

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<tr>
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<th>35-40</th>
<th>41-50</th>
<th>51-60</th>
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<td>Pre-COVID</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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ªRespondents were asked to rank their competence level with instructional technology in general during each time period using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being very good. This is the average of 10 respondents.

ªRespondents were asked to rank their competence level with providing online instruction during each time period using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being very good. This is the average of 9 respondents (1 participant did not complete this question).
Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, as the inclusion criteria stated above results in a smaller group of participants from which to choose. Purposive sampling also provides the researcher a method to ensure the highest level of variety is achieved within the sample, while also selecting participants who provide the best opportunity from which to gather the most relevant information, as is the norm in the field of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). Further, the goal of phenomenology is not generalizability, as is the case with other forms of qualitative methods (van Manen, 2017). The ability to generalize, or transfer, the findings of a study to the population as a whole often requires data saturation, when the researcher continues to collect data until no new information is being gleaned (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology, however, does not set out with the goal of generalizing the findings to the larger population. Thus, a purposive sampling process was appropriate for this study. The sample was recruited through the researcher’s contacts throughout the state and various local and state professional organizations. Suggested participants were contacted by the researcher to discuss the study, obtain informed consent, and schedule the interviews.

Procedures

Instrumentation

As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) state, “The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 3). To truly get at the essence of a lived experience - in effect, to “do” phenomenology - the researcher would be amiss to not use the interview process as the favored source of data collection. In this study, semi-structured life world interviews were conducted, with the opportunity for follow-up interviews. Semi-structured life world interviews serve to elicit full descriptions of experiences
and events in the subject’s life that allow for the meaning of the experience to be explored (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). (See Appendix A for the interview protocol.)

Throughout each interview, the researcher attempted to maintain an open atmosphere, allowing for spontaneous topics to steer follow-up questions into new territory. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note that the more the interviewer opens the floor for spontaneous input, the more detailed and lively descriptions will be received. The researcher can then drill further into those unexpected descriptions, eliciting a deeper view of the experience.

This study’s interview protocol also followed Brinkmann and Kvale’s format of changing the theoretical language used in the research questions into thematic language geared toward producing the knowledge needed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview questions consisted of open-ended questions aimed at gathering detailed descriptions of events rather than explanations of those events (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview protocol was used as a guide, with suggested questions that could be asked depending on the trajectory of the interviewee’s answers. For research questions one, two, and three, the researcher chose to use the same language in the interview questions as a way to promote consistency in exploring the three separate time periods, providing a solid ground for future analysis as all interviewee’s answers follow a similar path (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Interview questions consisted of how work expectations (parent and student needs, paperwork requirements, instructional delivery, instructional practices, etc.) have changed due to the pandemic, focusing on the description of specific relevant events and experiences. Interview questions surrounding research questions four and five were formulated to determine the meaning the interviewee found in the event being discussed. As van Manen (2016) writes, phenomenological questions “ask for meaning and significance” (p. 23) of the event. The goal of
such meaning questions is to more fully understand the experience so that one can behave more thoughtfully next time (van Manen, 2016). As one of the goals of this study was to explore strategies or programs that may assist teachers through a different traumatic event, these questions allowed the researcher to derive concrete practices and policies that could be implemented to alleviate teacher concerns in the future.

The initial interview questions were developed and piloted to a convenience sample. A convenience sample is one that is selected based on some factor convenient to the researcher, such as location, timeframe, or easy availability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The convenience sample for the researcher was a small group of higher education faculty in a university’s College of Education. The interview questions were piloted to this group to ensure coherence.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted virtually and audio- and video-recorded using the online conferencing platform ZOOM. ZOOM offers a variety of security features, including the use of a ‘waiting room’ where attendees are housed until the host allows them to enter the main conferencing room. This process was used to ensure that uninvited guests were unable to interrupt the interview process. During the interview, the interviewer and participants were located in private areas within their personal spaces, free of distractions. The interviewees did not participate within their place of employment or on contract work hours. They also were asked not to use employer-provided equipment, such as their school computer, in an effort to ensure any school- or district-specific information would not be inadvertently recorded or logged within their computer.

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed by an online transcription service, GoTranscript. GoTranscript is an online transcription service where the user can upload audio or
video recordings to be transcribed. Once downloaded to the researcher’s personal computer, the transcriptions were deleted from GoTranscript. They were then reviewed by the researcher to correct misunderstood words or unintelligible moments. The transcripts were member-checked to ensure the validity of the transcription. Follow-up interviews were scheduled if the transcription or member-checking process led to further areas of exploration. One follow-up was conducted due to this process to further clarify the type of teaching situation the interviewee was during the peri-COVID time period.

Interviews were conducted individually, with the shortest lasting for one hour and 11 minutes, and the longest being one hour and 47 minutes in length. The one follow-up interview was completed via email. Interviews took place over a three-and-a-half-week period from July 7, 2022, to August 1, 2022. During the interviews, the researcher made notations referencing the body language and tone of the subject. The confidentiality of the subjects was kept throughout the study, and all private information offered by the subjects was kept confidential by the researcher and stricken from the transcript unless written permission was provided by the subject to share within the report.

**Data Analysis**

The transcripts of the interviews underwent thematic analysis to determine similarities and differences among the experiences of the subjects in each time period. As described by van Manen (2016), thematic analysis within phenomenology involves exploring the “structures of experience” (p. 79). A theme is inherently a simplification of the meaning of the experience, derived through exploring the actual structures of the experience in question (van Manen, 2016). The thematic analysis in a study serves to reveal the “notions” or “sense” of the experiences (van Manen, 2016, p. 88). Through the use of the hermeneutic circle, these themes were continuously
compared individually and back to the experiences as a whole, in order to ensure as much fidelity to the participants’ experiences as possible. An example of the researcher’s use of the hermeneutic circle is seen in Figure 1, with an explanation below.

**Figure 1**

*Visual of the Hermeneutic Circle*

After preliminary thematic analysis of the interview transcripts of the peri-COVID time period, the researcher saw a theme emerge concerning a constant change in the schedules of schools as they were re-opening that appeared unorganized overall (the whole). That idea is exhibited in the quote taken from Participant 1 (a part). The researcher then looked within Participant 2’s words to determine if there was a similar situation discussed (a part). The two parts (the quotes) relate to each other and back to the original whole (the theme). The two participants’ quotes bolster the theme of “unorganized”, so the researcher knew that it should continue to be included as a theme and searched for within other interviews.

The processes of bracketing and memoing were utilized throughout the data collection and analysis stages. As previously discussed, bracketing is the intentional separation of the
researcher’s biases and assumptions about the topic accomplished through the inclusion of those thoughts in brackets on the collection and analysis instruments. Memoing is when the researcher writes personal notes, either on the instruments or not, regarding their thoughts on the topic, ideas for further investigation, or possible thematic elements that are arising (Creswell, 2005). Memos can help to contextualize the transcribed information or assist the researcher in more fully exploring an idea (Creswell, 2005).

The researcher made use of bracketing and memoing throughout the study. Developing themes (such as when participants referenced the concepts of self-determination theory) and personal biases (such as when the researcher had first-hand experience with a person or school that the participant brought up in conversation) were written in brackets on printed copies of the interview protocol for each participant. This process allowed the researcher to set aside these thoughts in the moment to focus solely on the experience of the participant. Another instance of the use of bracketing revolved around special education paperwork. The researcher has ample experience with completing special education paperwork and ensuring that it remains compliant as prescribed by special education legislation. When participants were discussing the changes in special education paperwork that occurred during the pandemic, the researcher grew concerned about the legality of some of the procedures. Those concerns were bracketed on the protocol as those were the researcher’s personal concerns, not ones specifically mentioned by the participants.

Memoing was also utilized to denote the context of some interviewees’ answers. When interviewees would take a long pause or tear-up when describing events, the researcher would note that on their printed interview protocol. These memos served as a reference to the researcher when completing the analysis stage, showing how the interviewee acted or felt during the event.
During analysis, common themes emerged among the participants. These preliminary themes were member-checked to validate the results of the researcher’s analysis. The transcripts and preliminary themes were reviewed in light of any new information gleaned from the member checks. Through this comparing and contrasting process, Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) note that the theme that stays the same over and throughout the experiences is the “essence of the phenomenon” (p. 31). Using this process, the essences of research questions one, two, and three were derived and member-checked for accuracy. These were then compared and contrasted across participants to determine the essence of research questions four and five. These were again member-checked for accuracy. Briefly, the themes by research question (RQ) were determined to be:

RQ 1: What were the lived experiences of special education teachers pre-COVID (January 2019-March 2020)?
“Just Being a Normal Teacher”

RQ 2: What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (March 2020-June 2020 and August 2020-December 2020)?
“Frustrations Beyond Their Control”, “Unorganized Process and Procedures”, and “Building Relationships”

RQ 3: What were the lived experiences of special education teachers post-COVID (January 2021-present)?
“School Like We’ve Never Experienced”

RQ 4: How have these experiences changed in regard to the day-to-day work expectations of special education teachers?
“Flexibility to Adapt to Rapid Changes” and “Grace, Forgiveness, and Love”
RQ 5: How have these changes affected special education teachers?

“Overcoming or Languishing”

Once the final essences were developed, they were filtered through the theoretical lens of Self-Determination Theory to evaluate the significance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness within the subjects’ lived experiences. Narrative anecdotes and quotations were culled from relevant subjects’ experiences provided during the interview process. The anecdotes, the results of the theoretical lens, and the overall essences were then member-checked a final time.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the research design of the study, including a description of the participants, the sampling method used, and the theoretical framework. The study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological method, employing semi-structured life-world interviews to derive the lived experiences of special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings organized by research question were presented and will be further detailed in Chapter IV.
Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter provides the themes that have emerged as the essences of the lived experiences of special education teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The essences will be presented in order of research question, interspersed with relevant quotations from the participants. When a theme intersects with an aspect of the theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory, it is noted in parentheses and discussed.

What were the lived experiences of special education teachers pre-COVID (January 2019-March 2020)?

Just Being a Normal Teacher

When asked to describe their jobs and lives in the year leading up to the pandemic, the overwhelming theme among all ten participants was that it was “normal.” Georgia stated that her schedule was “just a general, routine day, you know” (Georgia, 8-27-22). Eva stated that “it was a pretty typical school year up until that point” (Eva, 9-3-22). Anna discussed how much she was enjoying her teaching position during this time because “I’d done it before” (Anna, 9-4-22). Callie characterized a typical day pre-COVID as “…just your everyday paperwork, hustle-bustle, in and out” (Callie, 8-28-22). When talking about their job duties within a co-taught classroom, Laura used “just” and “basically” often, leading to an overall feeling that pre-COVID co-teaching felt normal to her (Laura, 8-27-22). Davis was a school-level administrator pre-COVID, and he characterized his day as “Discipline, instruction, parents, those sorts of things, like the day-to-day school stuff” (Davis, 9-3-22).

What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (March 2020-June 2020 and August 2020-December 2020)?
**Frustrations Beyond Their Control (Competence)**

The descriptor of “frustrating” or “being frustrated” was used by many participants when discussing their experiences during both timespans of the peri-COVID period. Several participants mentioned the requirement put on them by their schools or districts to contact every student on their caseload every day. This made Paula feel like she was “chasing the white rabbit”, as she was constantly emailing students, parents, and emergency contacts daily to ensure she met the requirement (Paula, 8-31-22). She said, “You were trying to touch base with the parent, but it was also making sure everybody is just comfortable, safe” (Paula, 8-31-22). Laura expanded on this idea, saying “I was constantly sending emails. I was constantly calling parents. I was constantly calling the children to get them to do something” (Laura, 8-27-22). Callie felt like she was “in a paint mixer” due to the ever-changing school schedules, and further describing it as being “on a hamster wheel. You’re just going and you’re not getting anywhere” (Callie, 8-28-22).

The switch to virtual instruction created some frustration with technology as well. Paul said, “I was frustrated because I said, ‘I don’t even know how to work this program.’ It’s been sitting on my screen. Then once I started navigating, I’m like, ‘Man, why haven’t I been using this the whole time?’” (Paul, 9-3-22). Paula discussed how some students in her district did not have access to the internet due to where they lived, causing them to be unable to complete online assignments. She stated, “...we printed off a lot of paper things initially, and then we developed more electronic things as we got WIFI things for students who live in more rural areas” (Paula, 8-31-22). The lack of internet access was a large issue in South Carolina at the beginning of the pandemic, leading to buses being installed with WIFI routers and sent out to different
neighborhoods or local businesses where they would stay for the school day to allow students access to complete their assignments.

These instances of frustration led to feelings of incompetence. Callie (8-28-22) stated that she was constantly asking “Am I doing this right?” when making the switch to virtual instruction (Callie, 8-28-22). Callie, a job coach at the time, said,

I think at first I was stressed out because I didn’t know what to do and how to support. Like I said, I felt like I was dropping the ball. Then feeling like I wasn’t doing my job, that somebody was going to say ‘Yes. Okay, so we don’t need job coaches anymore because we’re virtual.’ (Callie, 8-28-22)

Eva stated,

I was learning how to use Google Slides and Google Classroom and, oh, what’s this Screencastify? Just trying to figure out, how do I take this worksheet that I would just hand them and how do I make it so they can use it on the computer? (Eva, 9-3-22)

Davis directly addressed his own competence at the time saying, “I didn’t know how to teach them” (Davis, 9-3-22). Anna said, “I just felt kind of useless. I’m used to being very involved and very hands-on, and here I am sitting” (Anna, 9-4-22). These teachers’ perceptions of being unable to meet school requirements, the quickly changing school schedules, and the overnight switch to virtual instruction affected their overall feelings of competence.

**Unorganized Processes and Procedures (Autonomy)**

A second theme that emerged from interviewees related to the peri-COVID timespan was that it was “unorganized.” In South Carolina, each school district had the freedom to create their own schedules, both when solely on virtual instruction for the Spring 2020 semester and in the Fall 2020 semester as schools re-opened. Clara’s district had no set schedule for virtual
instruction; the teachers just had to post assignments online and hold office hours for an hour each day. Eva said, “I think at that point it was we just had to be available and we had to upload something, but we didn’t have to be live” (Eva, 9-3-22). Davis described this time period as “It was a hot mess, is what it was…. No one knew what was going on…. Every week, there was another program to try online” (Davis, 9-3-22).

When schools re-opened in the Fall of 2020, the state again provided districts freedom with how that would look for their areas, but, as Anna stated, “That may have been worse than virtual” (Anna, 9-4-22). Eva’s (9-3-22) district changed schedules very often - she said, “Seems like every two weeks…” through the end of the semester (Eva, 9-3-22). They began with students attending one day per week; then they moved to two days per week with an A-day/B-day schedule and Fridays being virtual; then it changed to Wednesdays being the virtual day; then the participant was teaching her students both face-to-face and virtually at the same time (known as dual-modality teaching). Eva also taught in dual-modalities, stating,

He [the virtual student] would have the computer up and when we would do our whole group stuff in the classroom, I would have the computer set up and the camera so he could see. I would present it to the kids and he could see it on his computer…. Then when we would do our group lesson, we would still do it where we would have the camera on and he can see most of the kids in the class and be a part of it. It was hard because you’re trying to behavior manage your class and pay attention, then he’s yelling, ‘Ms. Eva, I can’t hear you. Can you turn me?’ You’re trying to do both and that was really, really hard. (Eva, 9-3-22)

Laura’s school changed schedules often as well.
We had an A, B schedule, so we had half the kids on A schedule, and then half the kids on a B schedule and for two months, we had Fridays off. Then they slowly added that back in where one Friday would be the A kids, the next Friday would be the B kids, and we were supposed to have assignments for the days that the kids were virtual. I can’t even wrap my mind around it. You would be teaching but then they would have an assignment that they were supposed to do when they were at home, for the day that they were at home. (Laura, 8-27-22)

Davis noted that the constantly changing schedules were an “abysmal failure for the self-contained kids…they needed school” (Davis, 9-3-22); that as soon as the students figured out one schedule, the district changed to another one. Eventually, Davis’s self-contained students came back four days per week, with the entire district being on virtual instruction on the fifth day. Eva stated that it felt “like Groundhog Day” to her.

You get something situated and then something would change…then you’d start all over again. It was like, we restarted the year six times. It was very hard to establish routines…It was like we’d get a schedule figured out and then they would change it. Then we would get a schedule figured out and then they were like, “Okay you’re coming back to school.”…Every two weeks it was something new with masks and dividers and walk on this side of the hallway and keep track of this. (Eva, 9-3-22)

Georgia added that she felt like she was constantly in “survival mode” (Georgia, 8-27-22), figuring out how to stay afloat with each change.

The COVID restrictions on masking and social distancing caused issues in Davis’s self-contained classroom. Davis explained,
Some of our kids, they’re autistic to the 10th degree. Anything that touches their face, they freak out. They physically couldn’t wear a mask. They would take it off immediately. I would try. We tried. Then I had to make a behavior, not a bit am I exaggerating, but the school wanted me to make a task analysis of how to keep a mask on. I’m like, “Dude, I don’t know.” (Davis, 9-3-22)

When reflecting on the use of social distancing in his room, Davis recounts,

Six feet apart in the self-contained room which is super hard. There’s no personal space. These are the lowest learners in the school…. I had to teach them, but there’s no six feet apart. It’s impossible, literally. Plus, [there were] nine…or ten of them. It made me, not stressed, but another thing I had to deal with all the time. (Davis, 9-3-22)

Paula discussed teaching in similar conditions, saying “It was a lot of behind the desk teaching. There was a lot less hands-on activities just because you had to keep that social distancing now. It was really awkward” (Paul, 8-31-22).

The theme of “unorganized processes and procedures” also came up when discussing procedures for special education paperwork. While one district required special education teachers to make contact with each student on their caseload every day during virtual instruction, other districts had no such mandates. That district also held Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings for students virtually during the shutdown, while other districts gave parents the option of, “If you don’t want to have an IEP meeting this year, we can wait till the fall” (Eva, 9-3-22).

Once schools re-opened for the Fall, IEP procedures seemed to change rapidly within the first month. Besides holding those leftover IEP meetings, every time the schedule changed in the beginning, teachers would have to develop Prior Written Notices (PWNs) specifying for the parent and student’s file that there was a change in the student’s services. Eva explained,
Every time we would switch what they called “phases”, we’d have to go in and do a PWN. Explaining what – it was a buttload of paperwork to do. They’re like, “Oh, it’s just cut and paste.” Yes, it’s cut and paste 11 times and print all this stuff and put it in the file and you had to be keeping contact logs of are you keeping track of everything. (Eva, 9-3-22)

Later, guidance from the state allowed for the creation of contingency plans, providing an explanation of the student’s services on a variety of different schedules. However, these were completed at different times depending on the district’s and school’s needs. In her district, Paula said,

…just in general, I think the compliance piece was not as important at that time because people were so hard to get a hold of. We weren’t sure how we were supposed to hold these meetings without having in-person contact. We had to develop a policy and everything for our district that aligned with confidentiality laws and everything to allow us to safely meet and hold those IEPs. (Paula, 8-31-22)

The disorganization of the school schedules and IEP procedures contributed to a lack of autonomy for the participants. Teachers could not make choices about their day-to-day instruction when the schedule may change the next day. They always had to be ready to have more, or fewer, students in the classroom than they did the day before. This made it difficult to plan ahead in any meaningful way. Special education teachers also lost a lot of freedom during this time when it comes to the freedom to have unencumbered, self-directed time during the school day. The majority of this planning time was consumed with completing paperwork to satisfy the new IEP requirements. The constant, revolving door of schedules and paperwork
procedures affected these teachers’ feelings of autonomy and the ability to do what was best for their students.

**Building Relationships (Relatedness)**

A surprising, but heartening, theme that emerged was the development of stronger relationships with parents and students. Georgia noted,

But one good thing I can say about the COVID is that I did develop more strong parent relationships, and they understood who I was as a teacher and a person, you know, and I felt they knew that I really cared about their, their child and their well-being. (Georgia, 8-27-22)

Anna said,

I will say that I got to know them [parents] a lot better after the school closed down because I talked to them pretty much every day…. I don’t feel like I know my parents as well now because I don’t reach out as often. (Anna, 9-4-22)

Bailey echoed these feelings by stating, “The most important thing to me at the onset of COVID was ‘were you okay?’ I didn’t really care if you did anything you were supposed to do. ‘Were you okay?’” (Bailey, 9-4-22). She went on to say that this approach “better firmed” (Bailey, 9-4-22) relationships she already had with students and parents. When discussing parent relationships during COVID, Paul said, “Then parents would call me like ‘Mr. Paul, I need your help. How do I do this?’” (Paul, 9-3-22). These types of interactions were common among the participants and opened up a new dialogue of teachers helping parents help their children. Paul also provided an example of the development of a strong relationship with parents: “…I had a grandparent. She just had a birthday and I said, ‘Happy birthday to you.’…She just starts going in on, ‘You’re one
of the greatest teachers that my grandson’s ever had”’ (Paul, 9-3-22). Davis also discussed his relationships with parents during COVID,

Well, just being appreciative of me, because I try to keep open lines of communication with all my parents and I think they just got the perspective of they know what it’s like maybe, because they’ve had their child for either six months to a year and six months alone, I mean without school, and so I think they value being a teacher again, me doing what I’m doing and taking their child and trying as best I can. Parents just thanking me. Thanking me for my efforts or thanking me for calling or thanking me for the update or just their tone is appreciative I guess. (Davis, 9-3-22)

This was an experience that may not have occurred without the increase in family contact due to COVID.

The theme of “building relationships” falls into the need for relatedness within self-determination theory. In order to perform well, people need to feel like they belong, that they have support and friendship from others. The strengthening of parent and student relationships during COVID bolstered these teachers’ feelings of relatedness.

What were the lived experiences of special education teachers post-COVID (January 2021-present)?

School Like We’ve Never Experienced

Even though the majority of students and teachers were back in a typical school environment during this time, several participants still longed for the way it used to be. Anna stated, “I want to go back to the old normal” (Anna, 9-4-22), while Georgia lamented that “things will never go back” (Georgia, 8-27-22). During this time period, Georgia discussed how COVID was being used “as the excuse” (Georgia, 8-27-22) anytime a student didn’t complete
assignments or was absent from school. “I think COVID has become a catch phrase for an excuse…. We have to get back to living and not using it as an excuse anymore” (Georgia, 8-27-22). This led to further regression in some students’ skills and heightened stress on the teachers as they worked to bridge the gap in instruction that virtual teaching created. As Georgia (8-27-22) stated, “…it was time that we’ll never, ever, ever get back” (Georgia, 8-27-22). However, compared to the year spent in peri-COVID, Paul (9-3-22) stated that “doing it in person was a cakewalk” (Paul, 9-3-22). Anna stated that she was back in her “happy place” with her students (Anna, 9-4-22).

**How have these experiences changed in regard to the day-to-day work expectations of special education teachers?**

*Flexibility to Adapt to Rapid Change*

While all teachers, especially special education teachers, need to exhibit flexibility in their daily working lives, their experiences during COVID served to heighten the need for flexibility. Teachers constantly had to rearrange not only their schedules but their students’ schedules. They had to adapt to teaching while in a mask, with students surrounded by plexiglass, and without the use of manipulatives or hand-over-hand instruction for those students with higher needs. Davis, who is a former administrator, put it succinctly stating that “there was no right answer…. There was no, ‘This is what you need to do’” (Davis, 9-3-22) when it came to scheduling or preventative health measures. As Laura stated,

I really don’t know how it could have been done differently because it was just such a shock to all of us. I don’t think anybody was prepared for it and expected it to last as long as it did. (Laura, 8-27-22)
It was “impossible to know what to do” (Laura, 8-27-22) when faced with such a once-in-a-lifetime event.

**Grace, Forgiveness, and Love (Relatedness)**

Participants discussed how the idea of “grace, forgiveness, and love” developed through their time in COVID. Paula said that her principal told the faculty to “provide as much grace as possible. Grades were not as super important. We were more focused on here’s the assignments, but how else can I help you outside of the school realm?” (Paula, 8-31-22) when working with students and parents during the virtual semester when it came to completing assignments and working with technology. Eva (9-3-22) said that she “just took whatever. Whatever they gave back to me was great” (Eva, 9-3-22). Eva continues this thought by describing one of her students who had just become potty-trained,

I actually had a student who we had just potty-trained and I told the mom. I said, “If you do nothing else while we are out for COVID, please do not lose that.” I said, “I don’t care if you can’t read when we come back, but as long as he's potty-trained still, that’s something I would like to maintain.” (Eva, 9-3-22)

Callie continually asked herself, “Am I doing enough?” (Callie, 8-28-22). She worried that she was not doing enough to help her students and parents, stating that those thoughts “kept me up at night” (Callie, 8-28-22). In the end, though, Callie allowed herself some grace and came to understand that, “Given what we were given, I did the best I could” (Callie, 8-28-22). Eva also mentioned grace when she was asked about what would have helped her during COVID saying,

I guess having some grace for us like when it came to compliance and IEPS. We were trying to do everything we could to provide the services…. Now I’m spending three hours doing paperwork to just legally document, oh, this is what I’m doing instead of
taking the time to be able to figure out how to better teach your child through the
computer. (Eva, 9-3-22)

Laura also discussed this issue when talking about working so hard to get the students to pass
their classes, saying, “I feel like that responsibility or that accountability falls on us whether it’s
perceived or actual, we put that on ourselves” (Laura, 8-27-22).

The concept of giving, or allowing for, grace, forgiveness, and love fits within the self-
determination theory concept of relatedness. Relatedness references the need for support from
others, whether emotional support, technical support, or physical support.

**How have these changes affected special education teachers?**

*Languishing or Overcoming*

Throughout the analysis, it became evident that the participants were either languishing
in the trials they experienced during COVID, or they were actively working to overcome them.
First, there were those who struggled during COVID and continue to struggle today. Anna
lamented the changes that COVID forced upon students and teachers. Two years after the brunt
of the COVID restrictions, she stated, “I want to go back to the old normal” (Anna, 9-4-22). Two
other teachers left the field of special education due to issues arising from COVID. Bailey moved
into general education, stating, “I’m tired of writing IEP’s at three o’clock in the morning”
(Bailey, 9-4-22). Georgia, after 21 years as a teacher, retired two years before she had originally
planned due to COVID saying,

…it was just in my blood, and I loved it. I still love it. But, I just couldn’t do it
anymore…. you know when it’s time to leave, and I felt it was time for me to leave. I
gave it all I had in COVID. COVID helped me make that decision. (Georgia, 8-27-22)
Paula discussed the ramifications of teachers leaving the field during COVID, saying, “…we had a lot of turnover the previous year. With people either going to teaching virtually or retiring or whatever the case may be, I was the only original person in our department left by the end of it” (Paula, 8-31-22).

The second group of teachers were those that overcame those trials during and after COVID. Surprisingly, this group consisted of more participants than the languishing group. First, there were three teachers who moved up in their district post-COVID. Eva became a special education instructional coach so that she could help younger special education teachers through tough times as she had just experienced. She stated,

I was always the one mentoring them [new teachers], which I love being able to help and giving suggestions. I always just want to help people. I don’t ever want people to feel like they’re failing, and I don’t ever feel like my knowledge can’t be shared… I always liked that part but I never felt like I could be the best mentor and go in and observe lessons and give feedback, because I was carrying my own caseload… I had no intention of leaving, but I was like, ‘If I don’t interview for this job, I will never forgive myself for not trying.’ (Eva, 9-3-22)

Callie became a job coach for her district, helping students with transition skills and finding jobs of their own. In becoming the lead job coach after COVID, Callie said,

They [the administration] rely on me more to make those transition ideas or decisions. I’m more pulled into the big dog conversations. I guess the switch from two job coaches to a lead job coach with assistants has given me the role that I’m looking for…it’s a sense of responsibility that has been given to me that I’m comfortable with, but also challenges me. (Callie, 8-28-22)
Paula became a district-level special education specialist, providing paperwork compliance support to several schools in the area. She explained her decision to leave the classroom saying, I’ve always enjoyed the behind-the-scenes type of work. I never felt very good at lesson planning, because I did not go through a formal education degree, so I didn’t really learn the ins and outs of how to do that. I learned more about the disabilities and interventions and all of that stuff, so I feel maybe I’m a little bit better suited to this type of role because I do like to do the coaching aspect of talking teachers through how to deal with behaviors and the paperwork side of things. (Paula, 8-31-22)

Each of these stated that they would not be where they are, at this point in time, without the experiences and opportunities they incurred during COVID. COVID served as the impetus for them to realize their potential and strive to make conditions better for other teachers moving forward.

Another group of teachers overcame their struggles when they realized that they are better teachers now than they were prior to COVID. Paul discussed how being forced to utilize new applications and technology during the virtual semester showed him how to make lessons that both teach skills but also engage his students. He stated,

I’m a much better teacher for going through it. I’m much more creative now…. I think I would’ve made it there, I just wouldn’t have made it there as fast, because when you’re in the fire and you got to figure out how to get out, it’s much different than you just relaxing and just going through the motions. Yes. [The] pandemic sped up the process. (Paul, 9-3-22)
Paul overall felt more competent with technology and has integrated the strategies he learned into his everyday face-to-face teaching. This fits into the competence piece of self-determination theory.

Eva became a more autonomous person due to COVID. She used to doubt herself when making instructional decisions at times, but teaching through COVID showed her that she knew what her students needed. She stated that she would “do what is best practice even if I am told to do something else” (Eva, 9-3-22). She has learned to trust herself and her knowledge, and has developed the feeling of autonomy as discussed in self-determination theory. Callie also ended up feeling more competent and more autonomous due to COVID. She stated that she “went through the muck and came out on top” (Callie, 8-28-22), referencing her struggles with virtual instruction and working through paperwork and schedule changes.

Lastly, one teacher truly blossomed personally and professionally. Clara (8-27-22) had just come back to teaching after a few years off before COVID, and she was having a tough year with negative behaviors and knowing where to fit in within the school. She stated, “I thought my classroom management skills had completely left me” (Clara, 8-27-22). She was “a silent partner” in her inclusion classes, that she “felt like I was a failure as a teacher” and that she “didn’t feel like I was making a difference before COVID. It was like I was bailing water out of the ocean with a teaspoon” (Clara, 8-27-22). During the virtual semester, however, things started turning around. She began to feel like she was “making a difference in a few students’ lives” (Clara, 8-27-22) as those students would spend all day in her Google Meets class doing their work and talking to her when they did not have to. Clara stated, “I felt the ones that I actually did hear from in my Google Meets were the ones that, actually, didn’t need academic help. They needed emotional support” (Clara, 8-27-22). This shows growth in the area of relatedness. She
also stated, “I felt, I guess, more in control of my professional life than I had” (Clara, 8-27-22) when it came to co-teaching,

I could equate it to going down a river with rapids with the co-teaching. I would go through a really rough patch and then I’d come through a small smooth patch but I never had the oars. It was the same but I had oars. I was more in control of my job and in my professional life. (Clara, 8-27-22)

She learned ways to assist students in their general education classes, and many came to her with questions instead of the general education teacher. She explained, “I felt like I was really beginning to make my relationships and I was making a difference and they would seek me out for help” (Clara, 8-27-22). This shows growth in the area of autonomy. In the post-COVID year, she discussed how she had “finally figured it out” and had her “best year” in that district (Clara, 8-27-22). She stated, “My mental health was in a good place…. I felt like I was making a difference….I felt like I was helping them more in the co-teaching because I was supporting what was going on there” (Clara, 8-27-22). She had good relationships with the students and most of her co-teachers, and started speaking up for herself and her students when needed in the inclusion classrooms. She said, “I did good stuff. I did what a teacher should do. I guess I felt like a teacher instead of a TA or a sub” (Clara, 8-27-22). This shows growth in the area of competence. As a result of this overall growth, Clara stated,

I guess that’s why I became a teacher, that’s to make a difference in kid’s lives. Not just academically, but their lives. I had such incredible teachers growing up that made me realize my potential and what I could do to really feel like, okay, I’m there now. I am one of those teachers… That’s what I’ve learned with COVID is that I am the teacher that I always wanted to be. (Clara, 8-27-22)
When asked if she would have reached this conclusion without COVID, Clara stated,

    Probably not. Eventually, yes, but it wouldn’t have happened as fast. I couldn’t put my
big toe in it and ease into it, I had to jump in headfirst. I can’t imagine doing anything
else. If COVID hadn’t happened I still would have been a teacher. I probably wouldn’t
have loved it as much as I do because it showed me where my strengths were and what
I’m good at and how to use those to make myself a better teacher and make myself who I
need to be. (Clara, 8-27-22)

This teacher’s journey shows that it is possible to blossom, and even flourish, after a difficult
experience.

Summary

    This chapter presented specific findings from the study. Findings were organized by
research question, narrowed by theme, and included relevant quotations taken from the
participants. The concepts of the theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory, were also
woven into the narrative of the applicable themes. The next chapter will present a discussion of
the findings, present lessons learned, and detail ideas for future research.
Chapter V
Discussion

This chapter discusses the overall essence of the lived experience of being a special education teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several implications arising from the study are presented, as well as how the findings relate to the theoretical framework. The researcher then presents ideas for changes to policy and practice in the event of another pandemic resulting in a period of school shutdown and/or self-isolation and any methodological issues encountered. The chapter ends with limitations of the study and areas of future research.

Lived Experience Essence

The overall essence of the lived experience of being a special education teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in South Carolina, is that one either languished in that difficult time, or worked to overcome their negative experiences. While all teachers struggled at times, especially during the March 2020 through June 2020 timespan, some teachers had not moved beyond those struggles by the time of this study. They continued to want to return to the type of “normal” school they had pre-COVID. They discussed struggles they were having with bridging the learning gap created by COVID, with one deciding to leave the field entirely.

The majority of the participants overcame these issues and grew as teachers and people. Many found themselves to be better teachers with stronger relationships with parents and students after the pandemic. Three participants moved into higher-level positions with their districts due to their success during the pandemic. These teachers embraced the “sink-or-swim” mentality, working hard to make the best of a bad situation and come out on top. Clara expressed it as “I survived this, I can do anything” (Clara, 8-27-22). It is the researcher’s hope that all
teachers adopt this stance of learning from their struggles and overcoming in the face of trials, instead of languishing in the past.

**Policy and Practice Implications**

There are several implications for the field of special education that evolved during this study. They are organized into “The Bad”, “The Ugly”, and “The Good”, as there were bad, ugly, and good implications resulting from the pandemic. “The Good” are discussed at the end as the researcher wishes to end on a positive note.

**The Bad**

There are two main areas of “bad” issues uncovered during the study. The first is the disparate and unfair expectations that school and district administrators placed upon teachers as a whole. There appeared to be too many expectations placed upon teachers (i.e., to make contact with every student every day during virtual instruction or to teach special education students in dual modalities) or no expectations placed upon them at all (i.e., general education teachers only having to post assignments for virtual students but not actually having to teach them). When asked by the researcher “What were the expectations for what you were supposed to do?” during virtual instruction, Bailey answered bluntly, “Not a whole hell of a lot” (Bailey, 9-4-22). For Laura, the inconsistent expectations affected her work-life balance. She said,

The other thing that happened that year is the kids wouldn’t log on during their time. It might be six or seven o’clock at night, and one would log on or one would email me and say, can you help me with such and such? I felt like I had to. I felt like I was working 24/7 during virtual. It was terrible. (Laura, 8-27-22)
These expectations changed often and without notice throughout the peri-COVID time period, especially in the areas of school schedules and special education paperwork. This led to teachers feeling constantly in flux, having to quickly adapt to new changes every few weeks.

Another “bad” issue that arose is the lack of internet access in our communities and the ill-preparedness of our teachers in the field of educational technology. The pandemic exposed the inequities in our more rural communities when buses had to be dispatched to these areas to provide WIFI access for students. Many teachers discovered they were woefully behind in technology. Eva discussed how she had never used Google applications prior to the pandemic, so she spent their first couple of weeks figuring out the basics of Google Classroom once it was mandated that they utilize it for their assignments. Often, due to the nature of special education students, special education teachers are not required to make use of the newest technologies in their instruction, which automatically put them behind the learning curve when the pandemic caused them to adapt to virtual instruction, virtually overnight.

The Ugly

Two main issues are labeled as “ugly” due to their possibility of serious repercussions to students and teachers. First, the procedures for special education paperwork changed often and were different between districts. As Eva said, “I just wish we had some more direction from up, up. I’m not even saying school or district. The state and the federal level was still trying to figure it out too, but it just never got translated down” (Eva, 9-3-22). There have been several recent court cases across the nation concerning compensatory services for those services not provided during the pandemic, such as Z.Q. v. New York City Department of Education in February of 2023. It is unknown how many of these cases may have been prevented if the paperwork would
have been compliant, timely, and uniform. However, at the time, it was impossible to know how serious the pandemic would become and how long students would be without services.

Another “ugly” result of the pandemic was the serious mental health issues that developed, or worsened, in students and teachers. Laura (8-27-22) described her mental health during COVID saying,

It’s a good thing that I got through it because it deteriorated. I am not a stay at home person. I am an extrovert…. I literally wanted to shoot myself on a daily basis. It was really, really difficult…. My husband and my son are not very huggy people and I am and when we were in quarantine, I’d go in and just squeeze my son because I had no physical contact. He’s like, “Oh my god, what are you doing?” By the end of the summer, he started hugging me back because he was like, “Okay, Mom’s going to like, slip her lips.”

(Laura, 8-27-22)

The fear of getting sick, the overwhelming and constantly changing expectations, and the isolation that came with the pandemic exacerbated mental health issues. While legislation and funding has since been provided to address poor mental health in students, nothing state- or nation-wide has been provided for teachers. It is expected that teachers handle their mental health issues on their own time; however, that is difficult to do when they spend the majority of their time at school or on school-related tasks.

The Good

There were many “good” developments from COVID as well. Several participants noted that they believed themselves to be better teachers now than they were pre-COVID. All participants discussed how their relationships with students and their parents were strengthened during the pandemic. Three participants where hired for district-level positions that they would
not have applied for but for COVID. The most positive concept, in the researcher’s opinion, arising from the pandemic is the idea of giving grace, forgiveness, and love to ourselves and others. As several participants discussed, understanding others’ needs and providing assistance if possible became more important for teachers as they worked more closely with their students and parents. Also necessary is to give grace, forgiveness, and love to ourselves as teachers, meaning that we are allowed to have a bad day, to miss a deadline, or to forget to post an assignment. Most importantly, giving grace, forgiveness, and love to ourselves as people means that it is okay to take care of ourselves physically, mentally, and emotionally.

**Suggestions**

When asked what would have helped them at the beginning of the pandemic if they were provided it, participants discussed several practices and ideas that would have assisted them. First, they suggested that schools and districts should have made it mandatory for students to log in on a structured schedule during virtual instruction, counting attendance the same way they did when face-to-face pre-COVID. Anna (9-4-22) stated, “The biggest thing they could have given us that would’ve helped would’ve been to make the kids log on, to make it mandatory, to make it count” (Anna, 9-4-22). They also would have liked more time to prepare for virtual instruction. Many received only one day of advanced notice and only a few hours to be in their classrooms prior to their school shutting down. Paula explained,

> Just a slow, instead of just the hard and fast, we’re shutting everything down. I think the flu process, like if there’s 20% or more in your building, then we’ll start shutting things down. I think the fact that there was just so much unknown, people panicked and we just went to worst case scenarios, so we’re just going to shut everything down. I think if there had been a more gradual process for that, that would’ve been easier to manage, because it...
was literally, kids didn’t come one day. Staff was expected to be in the building. We had one day essentially to grasp what e-learning was going to look like, and I honestly think we needed more time to gather all of that and to really, maybe not having the kids there was fine, but as the team of teachers needed to have more time in the building before we were told we couldn’t come back, in order to understand how we were supposed to reach all our kids, how are we supposed to provide instruction, and all of that. (Paula, 8-31-22)

Another suggestion was to have students face consequences for either poor attendance or not completing assignments. Several teachers discussed how students were not held accountable and were passed on to the next grade no matter their progress during the virtual instruction semester. Anna explained this lack of expectations for students after returning to school from virtual, saying, “…attendance didn’t matter…so they’re taking this as their get-out-of-jail-free card, and they’re not coming if they don’t want to” (Anna, 9-4-22). Laura also discussed the ramifications of the virtual semester on the students saying, “I feel like passing them in 2020 whether they did the work or not was a huge detriment because they came back and they’re like, ‘Well, I don’t have to do it, I’m going to pass anyway’” (Laura, 8-27-22). A final suggestion was to require technology training for teachers, both pre-service and in-service, such as how to use ZOOM or Google applications. As Paul stated,

Getting that real knowledge of how to use ZOOM, getting that real knowledge of how to work with Microsoft Teams, getting that real knowledge of doing WebEx Host and Google Meet and all of these different platforms where you can have this teleservice. Just really learning how to work it and really just do a meaningful lesson. (Paul, 9-3-22)
Not only would it have been beneficial to understand how to actually use the platforms, but also to be provided examples and practice using the technology to provide meaningful instruction for students.

Some participants provided ideas for bettering the mental health of teachers if such an event were to happen again. Callie suggested for administration to simply tell them, “That it’s going to be okay and that we’re going to make it” (Callie, 8-28-22). For example, Laura’s (8-27-22) administrators told them, “We’re in this together, we know this is tough, whatever we can do to get through” (Laura, 8-27-22). Callie also suggested having a bank of resources to pull from of ways to support their own mental health and the mental health of their students, and discussed teacher social circles, where there would be a group of teachers who would get together virtually on a regular basis to talk through issues together. She explained more, saying, “Ways for teachers to connect on that level to where we don’t think we’re doing it alone, and just resources to help our students find success and to help them know that they’re not alone” (Callie, 8-28-22).

Implementing policies and practices that address the mental health of teachers could lead to more teachers staying in the field longer, positively affecting the retention rates of teachers overall.

As a result of this study, the researcher suggests the following policies or practices for districts and schools in the case of another pandemic event:

- Maintain and enforce a set schedule for teachers and students.
- Provide for a gradual move to virtual instruction and re-introduction to face-to-face.
- Hold students accountable for attendance and progress.
- Ensure current and incoming teachers are trained in the main technology platforms used by the school.
- Provide a safe space with trained personnel where teachers are free to discuss issues and work through problems together.

Implementing these practices would result in a less frustrating, more organized school experience overall, which could assist in improving teacher attrition rates.

**Self-Determination Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Self-Determination Theory. This theory posits that one’s feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness affects their ability to perform well in their lives. This was evident throughout the interviews and noted in Chapter IV where appropriate.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected teachers’ feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The switch to virtual instruction and the ever-changing expectations placed upon them made many teachers feel incompetent in their jobs. They also lost their sense of autonomy during the pandemic. Due to the health measures mandated by districts and quickly changing schedules, special education teachers especially lost the freedom to make best practice choices for their students. The researcher suggests that all people, not just teachers, were affected in the area of relatedness during the pandemic due to the isolation from others during times of quarantine. All teachers interviewed in this study experienced feeling a lack of competence, autonomy, and/or relatedness during and after the pandemic. The difference among them was how they overcame those feelings.

**Methodological Implications**

Utilizing a phenomenological research method comes with its own positives and negatives during the implementation phase. When choosing participants, the researcher endeavored to include as varied a demographic base as possible. Participants ranged in age from
35 to 62, had from seven to 27 years of experience, and taught at all levels of K-12 public school. They were also culled from five different school districts from across the state. Even though representativeness is not required in phenomenology, the researcher wanted to explore the lived experiences of a variety of different teachers in an effort to make the results as relatable as possible. The researcher also attempted to provide an open space for the participants to freely share their experiences with as little guidance from the researcher as possible. The interview questions were phrased in an open-ended manner, and the researcher asked follow-up questions to further explore topics brought up by the participants.

There were three main challenges experienced by the researcher during this study. In the beginning, the researcher planned to transcribe each interview on her own. This quickly became untenable due to the amount of time one transcript required. The researcher decided then to utilize an online transcription service with a high-level of security and good reviews from customers. This allowed the researcher to spend more time on the analysis section of the research method than self-transcription would have. A second challenge was of a more emotional nature. Some of the interviews became very personal, including participants crying, discussing their mental health issues, and sharing private information about their families during the pandemic. The researcher did not want to cause the participants emotional turmoil during the interviews, but, inevitably, the recall of such a traumatic time in their lives led to buried emotions coming to the surface. The researcher tried hard to maintain a balance between letting the participants talk and express their emotions, while still moving the conversation forward.

A final challenge presented itself during the data analysis stage of the research method. Ten interviews provided almost 15 hours of audio and video footage and 242 pages of transcripts to review. This resulted in many sleepless nights and full weekends for the researcher, taking
time away from family and preferred activities. While, ultimately, phenomenology was the correct method to use to answer the research questions, it is not for every study or every researcher.

**Limitations**

There are three main limitations within this study. First, special education teachers are the sole focus of this study. General education teachers faced their own trials and struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the researcher’s field is special education, so only special education teachers were chosen for the sample.

Second, phenomenological studies inherently face the limitation of having a small sample size. A sample of ten participants was determined to be ideal for this study, allowing ample opportunity to richly communicate their individual lived experiences while also providing enough substance to drill down to the overall essence of the phenomenon as a whole.

A third limitation exists in the sampling method used, purposive sampling. The set of narrow inclusion criteria for the sample necessitated a purposive sampling technique. Therefore, the results of this study are limited in their generalizability to the population of teachers as a whole and should not be interpreted as such.

**Future Research**

The results of this study and the information gathered during the interviews present ripe opportunities for further research centered on the COVID-19 pandemic. First is a long-term follow-up of the teachers, students, and parents affected by the pandemic. It would be illuminating to interview these people five to ten years from now to understand how their lives, long-term, have been affected educationally and personally. A second area of future research is the learning loss that students have experienced due to being on virtual or hybrid instruction for
over a year. How serious was the learning loss and how long did it take to bridge the gap? One area of research that could be completed now is how different schools and districts are working to combat the learning loss, if they believe they have been successful, and how they are measuring their level of success. Another area of research revolves around district emergency plans. One would assume that districts have updated their emergency plans to include a future pandemic and/or necessary shutdown of the school system. It would be interesting to see if they have, and the differences between what their plans would be if this were to happen again.

An area of research specific to South Carolina would be to examine how the teacher turnover rate is calculated to determine if it includes promotions within those rates. The data provided by Garrett (2021) discussed in the literature review section noted that the turnover rate is calculated as those teachers moving to another teaching/service position in another South Carolina school district. It is unclear whether a person receiving a promotion to a district-level position, as three of the participants in this study did, are counted within the turnover numbers or as complete departures from the field. It may be illuminating to re-evaluate the turnover rate depending on the inclusion or exclusion of such teachers.

The last area of future research could be re-analyzing the data from a case study perspective on individual participants to compare any trends or patterns that emerge among the different sub-fields of special education or other demographic variables. For example, one could determine if the younger generation of teachers have a higher competence in instructional technology and online instruction than the older generation, and what affect that may have had on their ability to persevere in the field during the pandemic.

Summary
This study explored the lived experiences of special education teachers in South Carolina during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was determined that teachers either continued to languish in the pre-COVID time period or overcame the struggles they experienced, with a higher number of those that overcame in the participant sample. Several quotations and anecdotes from the participants were included to illuminate their experiences and feelings as they tried to educate their students during the pandemic. Suggestions were given for policy changes and simple practices that could be implemented in schools and districts to assist teachers in the event of another school shutdown. It is the researcher’s hope that school and district administrators will read the actual words of the affected teachers, believe their retellings of their experiences, and implement changes in their buildings to better the lives of teachers overall.
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Doi: 10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.68


SC-TEACHER: South Carolina Teacher Education Advancement Consortium through Higher


Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Pre-interview Briefing

The goal of this interview is to explore the experiences of special education teachers before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, you will be asked about your experiences within the following timespans:

- Pre-COVID: January 2019 through March 2020
- Peri-COVID: March 2020-June 2020 and August 2020-December 2020
- Post-COVID: January 2021 through the present

I am looking for ways in which your work expectations have changed throughout the pandemic and how those changes have affected you. I want to fully understand what it was like to be a special education teacher during this historical event, so I may ask a variety of follow-up questions to explore your experiences more in-depth. You have the right to end the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions.

Your responses, identifying information, and other names mentioned will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. I will be recording the interview to the ‘cloud’ through the ZOOM platform and a transcription service. Only I will have access to the recordings or the final transcriptions, which will be stored in password-protected files.

Please review the consent form and ask any questions that you may have about the process.
## Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Follow-up Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers pre-COVID (January 2019-January 2020)? | 1. Tell me what your job was like before COVID.  
2. Can you remember a specific experience that embodies what it was like?  
3. How would you characterize your mental health then?  
4. At that time, what was your plan for continued employment? | 1. Explain that facet of your job in more detail.  
2. Can you describe your feelings during that experience?  
3. Can you give me an example of that?  
4. How did that make you feel? |
| 2a. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (March 2020-June 2020)? | 1. Tell me what your job was like during COVID, specifically Spring of 2020.  
2. Can you remember a specific experience that embodies what it was like?  
3. How would you characterize your mental health then?  
4. At that time, what was your plan for continued employment? | 1. Explain that facet of your job in more detail.  
2. Can you describe your feelings during that experience?  
3. Can you give me an example of that?  
4. How did that make you feel? |
| 2b. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers peri-COVID (August 2020-December 2020)? | 1. Tell me what your job was like during COVID, specifically Fall of 2020.  
2. Can you remember a specific experience that embodies what it was like?  
3. How would you characterize your mental health then?  
4. At that time, what was your plan for continued employment? | 1. Explain that facet of your job in more detail.  
2. Can you describe your feelings during that experience?  
3. Can you give me an example of that?  
4. How did that make you feel? |
| 3. What were the lived experiences of special education teachers post-* | *Some participants will have left the field during this time and will require | 1. Explain that facet of your job in more detail.  
2. Can you describe your feelings during that experience?  
3. Can you give me an example of that?  
4. How did that make you feel? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COVID (January 2021-present)?</th>
<th>different questions depending on their situation. 1. Tell me what your job has been like lately, specifically Spring and Fall of 2021. 2. Can you describe a specific experience that embodies what it is like? 3. How would you characterize your mental health now? 4. What is your current plan for continued employment?</th>
<th>different questions depending on their situation. 1. Explain that facet of your job in more detail. 2. Can you describe your feelings during that experience? 3. Can you give me an example of that? 4. How does that make you feel?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>For those participants who are no longer in the field:</em></td>
<td>1. Tell me what it was like to leave the field. 2. Can you describe a specific experience that embodies what that was like? 3. How would you characterize your mental health at that time? 4. What is your current employment and future employment plan?</td>
<td>1 and 2. Can you describe specific thoughts or feelings you had during that time? 3. Can you give me an example of that? 4. How does this make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How have these experiences changed in regards to the day-to-day work expectations of special education teachers?</td>
<td>1. Has anything changed in your daily work life from before COVID to now? 2. How has that change affected you? 3. Has that change affected your plans for continued employment?</td>
<td>1. Can you give me an example of that? 2. Can you describe your feelings about that? 3. How does that make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How have these changes affected special education teachers?</td>
<td>1. What are your thoughts on how the pandemic has affected special education teachers as a whole? 2. What about the field of education in general?</td>
<td>1. Can you provide any specific examples? 2. Can you provide any specific examples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. If this type of event were to happen again, what would have helped you?</td>
<td>3. How would that have helped you then?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Conclusion</td>
<td>1. Is there anything else you would like to bring up, or ask about, before we finish the interview?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thank you very much for your time. I will be back in contact with you to review the transcript of this interview as well as schedule a follow-up interview if needed. I appreciate your willingness to discuss your experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B

#### Demographic Chart of Participants by Name

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Certification Path</th>
<th>Level of School</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Location of District</th>
<th>Disabilities Taught During COVID-19</th>
<th>Years Experience</th>
<th>Instructional Technology Competence</th>
<th>Online Instruction Competence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pre=4 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
<td>Did not provide online instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>LD, AU, Speech, OHI, Mild ID</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=5</td>
<td>Pre=4 Peri=5 Post=5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Callie</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>ID, AU, Multi-categorical</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pre=2 Peri=3 Post=4</td>
<td>Pre=1 Peri=3 Post=4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pre=4 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=3 Post=3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Alternative Certification</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>AU, ID, OHI, MD</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pre=4 Peri=4 Post=5</td>
<td>Pre=2 Peri=3 Post=3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Primary/Elementary</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>AU, DD, Speech</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Certification Path</td>
<td>Level of School</td>
<td>Type of School</td>
<td>Location of District</td>
<td>Disabilities Taught During COVID-19&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>Instructional Technology Competence&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Online Instruction Competence&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>LD, Mild/Moderate, AU, OHI</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>LD, OHI, ED, AU, Multi-categorical</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pre=5 Peri=5 Post=5</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
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<td>Mild ID</td>
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<td>Pre=4 Peri=5 Post=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Masters of Teaching</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>LD, AU, ADHD</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pre=5 Peri=5 Post=5</td>
<td>Pre=3 Peri=4 Post=5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Explanation of disabilities: LD – Learning Disability; AU – Autism; Speech – Speech/Language Impairment; OHI – Other Health Impairment; Mild ID – Mild Intellectual Disability; ID – Intellectual Disability; Multi-categorical – encompasses a variety of mild and moderate disabilities; MD – Multiple Disabilities; DD – Developmental Delay; Mild/Moderate – encompasses a variety of disabilities including Learning Disability, Emotional Disturbance, ADHD, cognitive disabilities, and Autism; ADHD – Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.
Responses to the question: “Rank your competence level with technology in general during each time period using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being very good.” Pre – Pre-COVID timespan; Peri – Peri-COVID timespan; Post – Post-COVID timespan.

Responses to the question: “Rank your competence level with providing online instruction during each time period using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being very good.” Pre – Pre-COVID timespan; Peri – Peri-COVID timespan; Post – Post-COVID timespan.