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Parent–Teacher Interactions during COVID-19: Experiences of U.S. Teachers of Students with Severe Disabilities

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Abstract: In 2020, COVID-19 disrupted all aspects of society across the globe including healthcare, employment, social interactions, and education. In many parts of the world, abrupt school closures caught teachers off guard, as they were forced to immediately shift their practices from in-person to online instruction with little-to-no preparation. Furthermore, during this time, many parents of school-aged children vacillated between multiple roles associated with their employment, household caregiving activities, and supporting their children at home. These challenges were especially challenging for teachers and parents of students with severe disabilities. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. teachers of students with severe disabilities regarding interacting with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, including when schools initially closed in March 2020 and then reopened in September of 2020. This manuscript outlines six key themes highlighting parent–teacher interactions: (a) parents directing school decisions, (b) teacher inability to meet parent expectations, (c) parent–teacher communication, (d) parents as teachers, (e) parent exhaustion, and (f) teacher helplessness.



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 resulted in an abrupt shift in education, with instruction moving from in-person instruction in school settings to online instruction in family homes [1]. This shift resulted in hardships for all students in the U.S., including isolation, anxiety, limited access to broadband Internet, and food insecurity [2,3]. Such challenges, however, were exacerbated among students with disabilities [4], as research documents that many students with disabilities rely on structured learning environments, interactions with specialized educators, and assistive technology provided in school settings [5]. Moreover, research highlights how school closures during COVID-19 intensified inequalities between students with and without disabilities in the U.S., including students who have severe disabilities, students with a cognitive disability, autism, and/or multiple severe disabilities who require sustained support across settings [6–8]. The shift from in-person to online instruction underscored the degree to which curriculum and online instruction platforms were inaccessible for students with severe disabilities (SD), as well as the lack of professional preparation to utilize assistive technology to support students with SD [9].

School closures caused by COVID-19 also took a toll on families. Family caregivers (hereafter referred to as “parents”) were immediately forced to prioritize the competing demands associated with caregiving, employment, general household responsibilities, and, as a result of COVID-19, educating their children [10–12]. Parents also assumed the role of “student”, as they learned how to engage their children in online instruction [4]. Unsurprisingly, undertaking these roles was especially stressful for parents of students with disabilities who also began providing individualized services for their children that were previously provided by school professionals as part of student Individualized Education

Programs [13,14]. Such services included individualized academic instruction, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, medical care, and direct social skills instruction [4]. Again, stress and uncertainty caused by assuming these varied, essential roles was amplified for parents of students with SD, based on the intensity of their children's needs [11].

Finally, COVID-19 precipitously changed the way in which teachers approached their profession. In the U.S., teachers transitioned from in-person teaching to synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid instruction which resulted in a steep learning curve in navigating various online platforms, online resources (e.g., online lectures, discussion boards), and mechanisms to engage students [2]. Again, while these unexpected changes left all teachers reeling, educators of students with disabilities, and, in particular, teachers of students with SD found themselves traversing unknown territory while supporting students who require numerous forms of extensive, direct, one-on-one support. Teachers of students with SD are trained to implement specialized instruction (e.g., community-based instruction, self-management strategies, repeated practice, function-based assessments [15,16]). These instructional techniques, however, are not designed for remote learning [17]. In addition to a lack of preparation to provide effective instruction and support to students online [18], teachers also lacked preparation to engage in meaningful collaboration with their students' parents [19]. This is critical, as research documents the importance of parent-teacher collaboration to support students with SD [20]. For example, parent-teacher collaboration contributes to positive student outcomes, including academic, social, and emotional skills [21,22]. There has never been a time, however, that made parent-teacher collaboration more important than when schools closed during COVID-19. School closures required daily interactions between parents and teachers while both parties simultaneously attempted to adapt to new roles, concerns related to the pandemic, and lifestyle changes. Moreover, at the center of this turmoil were students with SD, a population of students with oftentimes diminished post-school outcomes (e.g., unemployment, limited relationships in the community) compared to their peers without significant support needs [23,24].

While some research has explored the perspectives of families during the pandemic [13,14], research has yet to explore the interactions between teachers and parents of students with SD during COVID-19 in the U.S. In particular, the perspectives of teachers of students with SD are relevant, as they can lead future parent-teacher collaboration efforts and help shape the nature of collaboration within the profession in both online and in-person settings. As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. teachers of students with SD regarding interacting with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, including when schools initially closed in March 2020 and then reopened in September of 2020.

2. Methods

The research team secured university Institutional Review Board approval prior to participant recruitment and data collection. The research team included four members: two white, female faculty members in a university department of special education and two white, female doctoral students studying special education in the same university department of special education. All members of the research team had years of experience teaching students with SD in the U.S. public school system. The team employed interpretive qualitative research design, maintaining that truth in reality is comprised of an individual's perceptions of their experiences [25].

2.1. Participants

The research team consisted of two white, female, English-speaking special education faculty members and two white, female, English-speaking special education doctoral students. All researchers were white females with experience teaching students with SD in U.S. public school settings. The team used convenience sampling techniques [25] to recruit participants with experience teaching students with SD when U.S. schools closed due to COVID-19 in March 2020. Participants were recruited from three suburban school

districts located outside of a mid-Atlantic U.S. city. The research team sent recruitment emails to school administrators, former co-workers, and teachers of students with SD with whom they were familiar from professional connections. Recruitment letters described the purpose of the study and included a link to an online demographic questionnaire and consent form for teachers of students with SD who were interested in participating in an interview about their experiences at three critical points of time in 2020: approximately one month after schools closed, during summer recess when school was not in session, and one month after schools reopened in the U.S.

Nine teachers of students with SD participated in this study, seven of whom identified as white/Caucasian ($n = 7$) and two of whom identified as Hispanic or Latino. Participant ages ranged: 18–24 years (9%), 25–34 years (64%), 35–44 years (9%), and 45–54 years (18%). Years of experience teaching students with SD ranged from one year to 17 years, with 56% reporting teaching three to four years. In addition, three participants taught in primary schools (grades kindergarten to grade 6), two participants taught in mid-secondary schools (grades 7–8), and four participants taught in secondary schools (grades 9–12). While all participants taught students with SD, the disability labels of their students varied (i.e., intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities, and multiple disabilities).

2.2. Interviews

The first round of interviews occurred when schools initially closed between March and April of 2020. The semi-structured protocol for the first round of interviews focused on topics such as transitioning from in-person to online instruction, initial reactions and challenges faced by participants and their students, support provided at the school or district level, and participant strategies to engage students in online instruction (e.g., *Was there any preparation for an online learning situation before you left the school building back in March? What does a typical work day look for you right now?*). The second round of interviews occurred during summer recess between June and July of 2020. School was not in session during this time. The semi-structured protocol for the second rounds of interviews focused on the evolution of online instruction as the school year progressed, areas of concern, areas of success, the impact of online instruction on planning for the upcoming academic year, COVID-19 health and safety protocols, and the state of student and teacher emotions (e.g., *What has helped or what needs to change to support your instruction? What is communication like with parents over the summer? What about the most predominant “rose”—something you’re most proud of—something that brought you joy and hope?*). The third round of interviews occurred approximately one month after schools reopened between September and October of 2020. The semi-structured protocol for the third round of interviews included questions related to returning to in-person instruction, teaching strategies used during mandatory masking and six-foot social distancing, and recommendations for teachers and school leadership (*Reflecting back on your experiences since March—what is that “thorn” that you just can’t shake? What was the missed opportunity, the barrier that really prevented you from addressing your priorities?*). All semi-structured protocols included discretionary probes (e.g., “Tell me more about that”) to promote natural discussion and encourage participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences [26].

All participants engaged in the three rounds of interviews. One participant, however, left the teaching profession during the summer of 2020, indicating that the workplace and expectations placed on teachers were unsustainable. This participant reflected on his experiences and described conversations with his co-workers who continued to teach during the third round of interviews. The research team conducted all interviews with a primary facilitator and co-facilitator via Zoom, audio recording and transcribing each interview through Zoom software. Interviews ranged from approximately 30 min to 60 min across rounds. Interview facilitators maintained a running record of field notes and debriefed after each interview, discussing general perceptions of key themes, reactions to

participant experiences as well as reasons why team members had those reactions (e.g., professional experiences).

2.3. Analysis

Data analysis began once the first round of interview transcripts were reviewed and cleaned by a member of the research team. After transcripts were cleaned and de-identified, the team engaged in a three-stage manual coding process: (1) initial open coding, (2) combining codes into categories, and (3) identifying salient themes or patterns from the data and participants' significant statements [27]. During the first stage, team members selected a single transcript to code to identify initial keywords, repetitive refrains, and significant statements [28] before meeting to discuss similarities and differences among their codes and create an initial codebook. Codes were included in the codebooks if the team unanimously agreed that the name and definition of the code accurately reflected participant intent. During the second stage, the team again selected a transcript to code, using the initial codebook as a guide for hand-coding the transcript. Again, the team met to compare and contrast their codes, determine emerging and irrelevant codes, and refine existing codes and solidify the codebook. For the third stage, the team used the finalized codebook and re-coded all interview transcripts. Example codes from the finalized codebook included "feeling overwhelming" ("anxious, overwhelmed with teacher responsibility, emotions, worries, workload, prep time, severity of student needs"), "Equity" (language as equity issue, technology as equity issue, resources and supplies as equity issue), and "Family Needs" (unfulfilled family needs, unaddressed barriers, family expectations of teachers, school, and county). Once all data were coded across each round of interviews, the research team analyzed key cross-cutting themes, noting those that overlapped across three data collection points.

2.4. Trustworthiness

The research team engaged in several trustworthiness measures. First, the co-facilitator conducted member checks immediately following each interview by providing participants with summaries of data, including key ideas and interpretations, and inviting participants to expand, correct, or contribute additional information. During this time participants corrected information (e.g., a participant corrected a misunderstanding about a parent advocate being provided by the school for free when it was, in fact, paid for by the parent) but more often expanded on information by providing additional examples or segueing into a related story (e.g., describing an additional example of a family experiencing language barriers). Second, the primary facilitator reviewed key themes and interpretations from previous individual interviews at the beginning of the subsequent interviews, again inviting participants to provide feedback, corrections, or expand on information. Third, the team transcribed, cleaned, and de-identified all interview data, which supported a greater understanding and familiarity with the data [27]. Finally, the team triangulated data via (a) multiple participants teaching in different grade levels at different schools/districts, (b) collecting data across three points in time, and (c) collaborating as a four-person research team while collecting and analyzing data.

3. Findings

Six key themes emerged across data collection periods: (a) parents directing school decisions, (b) teacher inability to meet parent expectations, (c) parent–teacher communication, (d) parents as teachers, (e) parent exhaustion, and (f) teacher helplessness.

3.1. Parents Directing School Decisions

Participants felt that school administrators ignored or overlooked the needs and wishes of teachers to appease parents (including caregivers and guardians) directing school closures. This caused an immediate rift between teachers and parents, as participants believed that "parents feel they run the school". This was particularly true among participants who

worked in “affluent area[s] with very highly educated parents” who knew that “if they ask, or demand, or stamp their feet, or yell enough, that they get what they want”. Participants felt vulnerable, knowing that they would be “railroaded” by parents who “go to central office [the head of the school district], because [administrators] give them whatever they want”. One participant noted: “It’s been very intense... [Administrator] wasn’t planning on closing... and he was just like, ‘Due to the number of [parent] responses-’ so he closed to appease them [parents]...”.

Like the “rushed” closing of schools in spring of 2020 due to “parent uproar”, participants indicated that parents “throwing a fit” during the summer of 2020 also resulted in “returning [to school] plans [being] so rushed... throwing us [teachers] into chaos all over again”. Participants expressed frustration with administrators “trying to be too fair and give everybody’s... voice and concern equal weight”, resulting in “the people who are being the most impacted right now [not] being heard or being dismissed”. For example, one participant indicated: “[I’m] wiping [student] noses and wiping butts. Like no, I’m sorry, I think my concern deserves more weight [than parents’] right now”. As a result, participants described developing “a kind of resentment” toward both administrators and parents, as they were left to “stand alone and against the families” without administrative support.

Feelings of resentment toward parents were intensified as “parents were taking frustrations out on teachers when [teachers] had no control over many of the things” when school closed and then reopened. Participants felt that parent frustration and stress was related to administrator decisions and communication “being boomeranged and projected onto us”. Participants also felt that parents perceived teachers as “lazy”, when teachers expressed concerns about returning to school in the fall of 2020 with COVID-19 infections not yet controlled in many communities. These feelings and experiences reinforced the notion that school administrators “should have taken a collective breath and actually come up with a plan [to close and return to schools] instead of trying to make it up on the fly” among participants. As one participant stated: “I think that hurt us way more in the long run because it just made parents mad because the plan kept changing”.

3.2. Teacher Inability to Meet Parent Expectations

Participants described parent “expectations [that] were a little bit high for what was really the reality of our situation” during online instruction. (e.g., “We are expected to create a magic pill.”). A common “parent complaint” included academic content being “too baby-ish”, when participants were primarily striving to “make sure that [students] have something” to do everyday as opposed to teaching new content. Participants also found the expectation to individualize online instruction to meet the needs of students who have “sensory needs”, low vision, medical conditions such as seizures, and/or challenging behaviors unachievable.

Despite some participants not receiving “any positive feedback” from parents, participants generally did not “really blame parents” for their frustration and anger: “I know that our team [of teachers] did what we could... it’s just... it’s kind of the nature of the beast”. Participants also found that parent expectations related to providing specialized services according to student individualized education programs (IEP) were unrealistic in an online space. For example, one participant indicated that, while some parents “Are like, ‘Yeah, you’re doing your best’ [others] are like, ‘My child needs services. What are you going to do?!’” Similarly, other participants described “parents [being] very crazy about [IEP] service hours”, or “inquiring about [IEP services] in an aggressive way... or an *assertive* way:” “Those [parents] that are upset, are *upset*”. Again, participants felt frustrated by a lack of administrative guidance on how to implement IEPs during online instruction and, more importantly, administrative support when parents raised concerns about IEPs—given that student IEPs are “a legal binding document” that schools are required to implement in their entirety. For example, one participant reported:

One of my parents... sent this long email [to] the superintendent saying how her son didn’t get any of his [IEP] services—he didn’t get any sessions with me.

He *did* get sessions with me. He *did* get related services. We always believe the parents over teachers anytime. I did write a follow-up to my superintendents and said, "Hey, there are total inaccuracies in this".

Parent IEP-related expectations left participants highly concerned because many IEP services were challenging to provide during online instruction: "You can't do OT [occupational therapy] on a computer. You can't do physical therapy on a computer". Participants noted that many parents asked, "How are you going to compensate for the lost IEP [services] that my kid's not getting?" and "complaining and stuff on Facebook", writing posts such as, "We're going to sue." In addition to fearing lawsuits from parents, such complaints made participants feel dejected: "You feel like you're not doing enough...".

3.3. Parent-Teacher Communication

Participants described barriers, as well as strategies they used to communicate with parents.

3.3.1. Communication Barriers

One commonly discussed barrier was parent unresponsiveness: "We're dealing with parents who are just not responding at all". Participants described not "getting anything back" from many parents despite numerous efforts to reach them by phone and email about important topics such as student attendance, parent signatures for temporary online IEPs, and concerns about student/family wellbeing. Many participants reached out to school counselors and social workers to help connect with unresponsive families. This was especially true among participants who did not have trusting relationships with parents before school closures: "One student that I'm thinking about particularly that is very, very unnerving and just makes me worried for her, the social worker and I are in contact... As a teacher, I could only do so much...".

Participants indicated that limited communication with parents was due, in part, to the "low socioeconomic demographic" in schools. Participants reported that families who "struggle financially" were less likely to be "involved" even prior to school closures, "not because they don't care, not because they're not interested or appreciate their child's education, it's that they're busy, and they're working..." These families were also less likely to have access to technology or may not "even have an email account".

Furthermore, participants noted that "communication was really challenging" among parents who did not "really understand English" (the dominant language spoken by participants). Participants interacted with parents from numerous countries (e.g., "Ghana, Pakistan, Afghanistan", "Mexico", "Nigeria", "Latinos from all different parts of the world who speak different languages"), making communication challenging, even among bilingual participants. In addition to learning English, participants reported that some families also did not read in their first language and that many immigrant families were also experiencing "a cultural shift" as they adjusted to living in the U.S. These factors compounded during COVID-19 and were made even worse by limited access to interpreters and translators. For example, "swamped" translators often took too long to provide parents important time-sensitive information (e.g., "the IEP is not translated") and participants had to "to call them [interpreters] in advance" to make appointments to interpret for families, although participants often did not "know when you need to make the call... especially right now with all the online instruction—it's insane".

In addition, participants indicated that communication challenges were intensified when meetings were held via "teleconference" (i.e., phone) instead of in-person or via a video platform (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet). Participants universally disliked teleconference IEP meetings for several reasons, including an inability to read social cues, limited back-and-forth dialogue, an inability to review documents as a team, and, in more than one case, 30–60-min time restrictions that automatically ended calls. When a call abruptly ended, participants had to reserve another time slot on the school phone and reschedule interpreters, as needed. This process resulted in missed opportunities for communication, truncated conversations, and limited opportunities to build relationships with parents.

3.3.2. Communication Strategies

Participants also described strategies they used to communicate with parents more effectively. Parents provided “feedback that the amount of emails that the school is sending out is daunting and overwhelming”. As a result, participants “lessen[ed] communication” to parents, focusing on “establishing a line of communication” via predictable weekly emails/calls that simplified information provided by administrators (e.g., telling parents to “bookmark this link”, “here’s everything that you need to know to access online learning”). This clear, teacher-created information was especially important because “everyday something changes in the [schools]” and parents needed individualized information related to their family or child’s needs such as “where to find resources”.

Unlike teleconference meetings, participants found that video supported by online platforms such as Zoom or Google enhanced communication and collaboration. Participants observed that parents “actually engaged” in interactive conversations during videoconference meetings and videoconferences resulted in less confusion and conflict between parents and teachers. Participants indicated that videoconferencing supported: (a) sharing and editing documents; (b) robust multimodal communication through talking, gesturing, facial expressions, and via the chat function; (c) parent comfort when joining meetings from their homes instead of meeting at school; and (d) other family members (e.g., grandparents, older siblings) and close family friends contributing to meetings. One participant stated: “It’s powerful... to see 23 people (literally) in 23 different places all on a Zoom call for your kid”.

3.4. Parents as Teachers

Unlike their observations of teachers who instruct students without SD (e.g., “some teachers were like [whine voice] ‘Waah I don’t want the parents around’”), participants agreed that parents of students with SD participants “appreciated” parents “acting as a paraprofessional [teaching assistant]” during online instruction. Participants noted that students did not access instruction “unless you had your mom or dad sitting right next” to them. Parents “offering support” in numerous ways, including prompting students (e.g., “like ‘okay, she [the teacher] just asked you a question...’”) during online instruction and providing physical and occupational therapy support (e.g., parents learning how to use a wedge to support student posture or comfort). Participants also supported parents to implement positive behavior support strategies: “I laminated token boards, I dropped it off [at the student’s home]... and [made] instructions on what the token board is, how to use it, how to implement it during online learning”. Participants also supported parents to utilize basic computer functions (e.g., microphones) for students to access online learning and navigate online platforms (e.g., “We have so many parents that don’t even know how to check their email.”).

Furthermore, despite feeling a “deep appreciation” for parents supporting their children during online instruction, participants also reported feeling that they were “being judged” by parents as the parents “sat right next to students” and “observ[ed] all day”. Although they were confident in their teaching strategies, participants felt “a little nervous” about parents criticizing their teaching practices such as repetition of content (e.g., “I don’t want the parents to think that I’m not doing anything new...”). Participants felt uncomfortable redirecting or disciplining students during online instruction with parents “sitting right there:” “You don’t discipline someone else’s kid in front of them. Like telling a kid “If you can’t be quiet, I’m putting you on mute” and it’s like oh crap... your mom is sitting right there...”.

3.5. Parent Exhaustion

As schools opened, closed, and reopened, participants became keenly aware of the “strain placed on parents to be teachers on top of all of their other worries and full-time jobs”. They also empathized with the stress placed on family units: “I have a couple of students who have siblings who thankfully are able to help them [students with SD]... I’m

so thankful for the siblings... That burden, I know that's a lot, that toll...". Furthermore, participants felt especially "worried" for families who "don't have a grasp of their medical needs of their child" or who have children with SD with "a lot of behavioral issues" who "use very aggressive behavior as [their] form of communication".

In addition, participants sympathized with "parents that really are trying to catch a break and have their cup of coffee or send the two emails that they can" and, as a result, "tried not to mess with what's working" for parents by not pressuring parents to force their children to attend or participate in online instruction. Participants also tried to individualize student schedules based on family needs (e.g., "I emailed one family at a time being like, 'Here are your choices for your individual [instruction] time, pick one'").

3.6. Teacher Helplessness

During the second and third rounds of interviews, participant perspectives shifted from feeling attacked by and frustrated with parents to feeling powerless and despondent by their inability to effectively collaborate with and support families during school closures and even after schools reopened. Participants acknowledged that, despite their best efforts, they were "disserving" students and families and that, by and large, COVID-19 "brought to the front... everything. Everything that is heartbreaking..." regarding inequities in education. Examples of inequities included inequitable access to technology (e.g., school policies imposing a large "checkout fee" for families to access student communication devices or positioning equipment from school to use in the home) and a general disregard of teachers of students with SD among administrators. Participants observed intensified inequities among families who did speak English as their first language and/or those with low household incomes; observing wealthy, English-speaking parents receiving greater communication, resources, and individualized attention from administrators and teachers.

Participants indicated that they did not "know how to fix" the inequities COVID-19 surfaced, lamenting that they "have no idea" how to support parents, but wanting to do more: "I wish I could go to your house and help you, I really do! But I can't...". Participants noted, however, that they did their best to assuage parent fears related to students failing grades, suggesting that parents "pick their battles" when it came to student behavior, motivation, and completion of school assignments:

We had a family reach out saying "Anytime we put work in front of her, she doesn't want to do it... will that impact her graduation?" and we're like, "No! It's not worth that battle!" I think that's what a lot of parents of our [SD] population are seeing, it's not worth the battle.

Considering the "obvious strain placed on parents", participants agreed that "we need to come up with ways to maintain engagement with students without adding to the crisis in which many families find themselves emotionally". One participant found a silver lining in collaboration with parents amidst the strain and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic: "I do think that this [disruption in schooling] could help us look at things differently in the sense of what tools do we provide that are actually relevant, what tools do they actually use?" Participants also noted that unmet student and family needs and clear inequities between students with and without SD (which were exacerbated among families who "don't have resources, don't have money") present an opportunity to reconsider the state of education and "prioritize" policy and practice "changes" to better support parents and students with SD into the future.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of U.S. teachers of students with SD regarding interacting with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, including when schools initially closed in spring of 2020, during summer recess, and when schools reopened in fall 2020. This study reported data related to six themes: (a) parents directing school decisions, (b) teacher inability to meet parent expectations, (c) parent-teacher communication, (d) parents as teachers, (e) parent exhaustion, and (f) teacher helplessness. The

multi-interview process, occurring from March through October 2020, demonstrated that the parent–teacher interactions were dynamic and, according to participants, improved as time passed with regard to instances of positive communication and collaboration. A predominant shift appeared to occur as participants recognized communication barriers and inequities, focused on increasing effective communication that formed relationships with parents, and began to empathize with parent frustration in place of internalizing the “boomerang” cycle of parents projecting their frustration with other matters (e.g., communication from school, prioritizing multiple roles, fear of infection) onto participants. These findings provide a unique view into the experiences of teachers of students with SD as they found themselves embattled with, while simultaneously reliant on, parents during school closures.

Findings from this study contribute to existing literature. First, consistent with previous research, participants noted that COVID-19 “brought [inequities] to the front”, highlighting and amplifying chasms between parents and students with and without socially valorized characteristics (e.g., first language, race, income) and access to resources and skills to access online instruction materials [29,30]. This study also adds to literature that documents that these inequities that surfaced during COVID-19 were exacerbated among students with disabilities [5,14]. This study, however, contributes to the literature by deepening an understanding of the intensified level of inequities experienced by students with SD and their parents.

Second, participants reported that parents of students with SD were overwhelmed and frustrated and described internalizing this frustration. These findings are consistent with research describing the overwhelming stress parents experienced as they supported their children engaged in online instruction, while maintaining other roles [11,13]. However, this study provides a unique look into the experiences of parents of students with SD as parents and other family members (siblings) assumed a fulltime co-teaching role with participants.

Third, as noted, participants reported strained relationships with parents during the first round of interviews. During these conversations, participants consistently described the ways in which administrative communication and decision-making contributed to tension between teachers and parents. Participants also indicated that administrators did not provide adequate guidance or support—particularly to teachers and parents of students with SD and other historically marginalized populations at schools (e.g., families living in poverty, emerging bilingual parents). Limited administrative guidance is commonly reported in education research conducted during COVID-19 [10,31]. This study further emphasizes the influence of administrative uncertainty on the interactions of teachers and parents of students with SD during COVID, interactions that influence the outcomes of teachers, parents, and students alike [32,33]. Fourth, participants indicated improved interactions coincided with a deeper understanding of parent perspectives. Although participants initially felt flustered and defensive, participants began to empathize with parent stressors and daily exhaustion. Mutual recognition of parent and teacher efforts and exhaustion resulted in a shift in perceptions, with participants adopting a ‘with not against’ mentality—as evidenced by positive communication, instructional collaboration, and gratitude. Many participants indicated that strategies such as sending individualized emails, attempting to teach around family schedules, listening to parent concerns, and videoconferencing supported the development of positive relationships. Research on teacher–parent relationships reinforces the importance of such family-centric forms of communication developing collaborative relationships and supporting student outcomes [34].

4.1. Limitations

Convenience sampling is common in qualitative research, but can result in bias or a limited view of the research topic [35]. In addition, the process of recruiting participants through emails sent to school administrators left the research team unable to determine if or to whom invitations were distributed. Furthermore, while qualitative research is

not intended to be generalized [36], study participants maintain relatively homogeneous characteristics (e.g., U.S. region, race, gender, first language).

4.2. Implications for Policy and Practice

This study holds multiple implications for policy and practice. First, online instruction for students with SD was dependent on support from parents. As a result, administrators and teachers may consider providing professional development and implementing family-centric communication practices, including school-wide ways to ensure all families receive clear, digestible messages—translated and individualized, as appropriate. In addition, participants overwhelmingly described the benefits of videoconference meetings via Zoom, a practice that school administrators and teachers may consider implementing on an ongoing basis, based on parent/student preference. In addition, school professionals should consider developing video tutorials/written directions for participants to join videoconference meetings from their phone, tablet, or computer. In addition, given limited access to technology among families, schools should direct public funds to technology (e.g., Internet hotspots, personal computers, touchscreens) for families in need. School professionals (e.g., teachers and administrators) should also consider developing a solidified plan for future long-term school closures (e.g., communication protocols, translated/video directions for accessing online materials, at-home services, increased numbers of interpreters). This may include plans to retrieve materials from schools, as well as tutorials on how to implement research-based academic and behavioral strategies such as behavioral momentum [37], behavior contracts [38], token economy [39], modeling [40], and direct instruction [41], as well as adapted resources for students with SD so that they may learn with less support from their parents (e.g., modified at-home learning packages). In the same vein, school professionals may partner with local parent advocacy and support organizations to engage interested parents in learning sessions related to strategies to support their children. Furthermore, communication protocols may include establishing response-time expectations (e.g., teachers will respond within 24 h) and to whom to direct specific questions (e.g., questions regarding IEP goals should be directed to teachers, questions regarding IEP services should be directed toward administrators) [42].

In an attempt to mitigate frustration and tension among and between teachers and parents, administrators should provide guidance for teachers of students with SD to make consistent decisions regarding student IEP services for longer-term closures that may occur in the event that a circumstance such as inclement weather, school violence, or another contagious virus occurs. For example, school administration may establish an expectation to maintain progress or generalize skills to home and community settings, as opposed to making demonstrative strides related to IEP goals during at-home learning. Moreover, schools may consider using the challenges and strategies reported in this study to consider opportunities to establish school-wide family engagement goals. For example, administrators may consider ways to provide teachers time to visit student homes [43], prior to the school year to proactively develop positive relationships and determine student and family needs. Similarly, school systems may investigate eCoaching with families [44] to provide families real-time support to their children during closures. Furthermore, school systems should consider providing specialized professional development for teachers to effectively engage students with students with SD in online settings. This may include training on how to engage in distance coaching, as well as information on how to use software (e.g., Adobe) to adapt materials, or remote into student computers that are provided by schools. Finally, institutions of higher education should consider integrating online instruction strategies and mechanisms for effectively collaborating with parents in teacher and school administrator preparation programs. Such strategies may be incorporated into academic and behavior methods courses, as well as a standalone course on the use of technology in education.

4.3. Future Research

Future researchers may consider taking an appreciative approach to learning more about practices that were effective during school closures such as internal and external communication strategies, approaches to emotional and mental wellness, and administrative, teacher, and family support strategies. Furthermore, future research must continue to examine effective online instruction strategies for students with SD. In addition, it is critical that future research continues to interrogate the inequities in services and support between differing populations of parents and students to inform policy and practices to address disparities in student and family outcomes.

Finally, this study included a relatively homogenous population of teachers of students with SD who taught in districts outside of a mid-Atlantic U.S. city. It is critical that future researchers seek to understand the perspectives and experiences of other populations across the U.S. (including under-resourced communities), as well as the experiences of teachers, students, and families in international settings to more comprehensively and holistically understand what occurred during school closures and glean ways that schools can optimize support for teachers, student therapists, parents, and students with SD. Furthermore, given the emphasis participants placed on the actions of school administrators, researchers should investigate the experiences of school administrators, including the decision-making processes and how they may approach long-term school closures in the future, including supporting marginalized families and students with SD.

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