

Collaborating to Accommodate: Teacher Insights About Providing SPED and EL Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the US public education system under great stress, resulting in quick, emergency changes. This stress has been particularly apparent in providing accommodations needed to Special Education (SPED) and English Learners (ELs). This paper reports on a qualitative narrative study based on interviews with K-12 educators from within the U.S. and abroad. Authors attended to the challenges that teachers have faced during remote instruction-highlighting teacher innovation and collaboration in providing SPED and EL accommodations during the pandemic. Despite unprecedented challenges at the state, district, and especially the family level, teachers worked together to generate strategic and creative solutions to reach out to students. Our research suggests that district, state, and federal decision makers would be wise to support teacher-led efforts to design adaptations that meet the needs of their circumstances, with greater consideration of the material and emotional support teachers will need.

Keywords:

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges to serving diverse learners in K-12 schools, especially in districts where education has moved to remote instruction. Teachers are bearing the closest witness to the transformation of instruction under these conditions, and thus serve as one of best sources of insight into the ways schools are responding to this crisis. This article reports on interviews with teachers about the many challenges and successes of their innovation and collaboration in providing accommodations for English Learner (EL) and Special Education (SPED) students in remote and hybrid learning circumstances during the pandemic. The authors acknowledge the many differences between the needs of students designated as ELs and those designated as in need of SPED services.¹ However, insofar as these students require specialized accommodations usually performed in-person, there are similarities in the struggle to modify these accommodations for on-line instruction.

The purpose of this paper is to examine these similarities in the work of accommodating

1. It is possible that some readers will object to the comparison on the grounds that EL students have in the past been treated as learning disabled and this conflation constitutes a form of racist bigotry. We reject this reason for recoiling from the comparison, because it is itself grounded in an ableist assumption that students with disabilities are somehow less human and therefore any association with them constitutes an affront. What we need is an educational system that treats all students as fully human and compassionately accommodates all forms of human difference.

learning differences under these new conditions. This examination will provide insight into the way teachers have responded to important equity challenges precipitated by the pandemic, and how teachers develop and share the practical knowledge about accommodating differences in schools and the supports that assist in that work. First, we will introduce our theory and methods to situate the discussion of relevant literature and our findings within the context of teacher practical knowledge and the need to center their voices and experiences. We then explore literature on EL and SPED learners to provide context of their unique learning needs both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we discuss our findings which demonstrate that despite challenges at the state, district, and family level, teachers collaboratively generated strategic and creative solutions to reach out to students. We conclude with recommendations for not just EL and SPED instruction, but also the preparation of EL and SPED teachers.

Theory and Methods

This project is grounded in the assumption that much of the intellectual and emotional work of adapting educational service to the pandemic has been done by teachers. As such, teachers have uniquely intimate insights into both student needs and the support teachers need to meet student needs. At the most general level, our analysis is grounded in the teacher practical knowledge literature that frames teachers as thinkers, decision-makers, advocates and activists (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Clandinin, Caine, & Lessard, 2018; Clandinin, 2019; Craig, 2018; Elbaz, 2018; Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Rosiek & Gleason, 2019). Generally, a teacher practical knowledge framework supports the argument that there is a knowledge about teaching that emerges directly from teaching practice. This knowledge is not reducible to generalized or standardized teaching techniques nor subject mastery. Instead, it centers how teachers adapt content, curriculum, and pedagogy to the particular circumstances of their communities, classrooms, and students.

This literature warrants the centering of SPED teachers and teachers of ELs as uniquely qualified to generate the knowledge that is needed to respond to the challenges of this pandemic equitably, especially for students with additional educational needs. Therefore, we center the voices of these teachers as a form of evidence for teachers' thoughts about meeting the needs of EL and SPED learners when using remote teaching formats. It also provides justification for teachers' practical decision making as a primary site for the implications of this research. It is from this teacher collaboration and knowledge-making that we draw conclusions and implications for practice, policy, and teacher education. In the following table we outline important information about our participants and data collection.

Table 1
Participants and Data Collection

Study Section	Components
Number of Participants:	100 (and growing)
Type of sampling:	Convenience and snowball sampling (based on existing connections to the researchers)
Participant Criteria:	Pre-K-12 teacher
Participants From:	US: OR, AZ, WA, NC, SC, PA, IL, TX +

Israel, Ecuador, Thailand, Spain

Method of data collection:

Approximately 1 hour semi-structured interviews via Zoom

Note. OR-Oregon, AZ-Arizona, WA-Washington, NC-North Carolina, SC-South Carolina, PA-Pennsylvania, IL-Illinois, TX-Texas

Data was drawn from a larger study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers' practice in schools where teaching was moved on-line or to hybrid formats for a period of time. This project involved over 100 interviews with teachers from all over the world, including but not limited to interviews with U.S. teachers in Oregon, Illinois, North and South Carolina, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Texas, as well as teachers in Ecuador, Mexico, Thailand, Spain, and Israel. Most of our data is from our U.S. participants, but we also gained important insights from international participants. Initial participant recruitment followed convenience sampling, which grew out of pre-established connections between researchers and in-service teachers. Snowball sampling was then used based on the connections of the initial interviewees. Interviews focused on how teachers made decisions about the way their instruction would be adapted to remote teaching platforms. We asked teachers what adjustments were prescribed by central administration, what adjustments they had to devise on their own, and what sources of knowledge they relied upon to develop the latter adjustments. The interviews were conducted using Zoom video meeting software and transcribed using Zoom and Otter.ai transcription softwares. Dedoose data analysis software was used to manage the data and code it for various topics and themes.

The current study focuses on teachers' lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1998) during the pandemic providing services to students eligible for SPED and EL support (Charlesworth, 2005; van Manen, 1995). We focused on interviews in which teachers spoke at length about serving EL or SPED students. Themes related to these topics were identified following a naturalistic approach, which recognizes the multiple viewpoints of the pandemic reality for teachers supporting students identified as EL and SPED students and how they are influenced by the larger social and power dynamics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1998). This approach to coding does not follow a linear process of identifying overarching themes, but rather aims to highlight the complexity of small excerpts of data as they relate to the challenges and success of collaborating to accommodate EL and SPED students during the ongoing pandemic. Follow up interviews were conducted with select participants to refine interpretation of these themes.

Ours is not a random sample of teachers and therefore no claim is made that these themes represent the experience of a general population of teachers. Nonetheless, there was considerable consistency across many contexts regarding the kind of work teachers faced and their means of adjusting to remote instruction. This consistency has been reasonably interpreted as an indication of structural consistencies in the nature of the challenges generated by a sudden shift to teaching remotely during a pandemic. In what follows we develop an inventory of some common challenges that teachers faced when serving EL and SPED students, the various ways teachers adapted their accommodation practices to remote instruction, and the ways they acquired and shared information about doing so. This is used as a basis for reflection on the kind of material and professional development support that would be most useful in similar crises in the future and as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold. It is also used as the basis for more speculative reflection on the

general relationship between teacher professional development and teacher innovation that supports EL and SPED accommodations. To provide more context for the challenges discussed in this paper we now introduce background information on EL Accommodations, as well as SPED learner accommodations.

English Learner Accommodations

ELs are identified as those students who primarily communicate in a language other than English at home and are thus eligible for structured English immersion or sheltered English instruction supports, such as pull-out English-as-a-second language (ESL) or English-language development (ELD) classes (Baker & Wright, 2017). The support ELs receive involve both general education and specialist teachers whose primary goals are to help ELs transition as quickly and smoothly as possible from pull-out support to the mainstream classroom. Even in dual-language or two-way bilingual classrooms, where the mainstream classroom includes instruction in English and another language, most commonly Spanish, students identified as ELs continue to receive the same kinds of ELD, pull-out accommodations. Nearly 10 percent, or 5 million, k-12 students in the United States are identified as ELs (Robinson-Cimpian, Thompson, & Umansky, 2016). As one of the fastest growing groups of students that receive special services, ELs warrant systemic efforts to provide them with equitable schooling experiences, opportunities, and outcomes—which has proved to be quite challenging (Ramírez, Faltis & de Jong, 2018).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, accommodations for EL students have generally been focused on formal English literacy skills. For example, teachers of ELs often supplement reading assignments with explicit vocabulary scaffolding and pre-reading strategies, such as asking students to make predictions about the text based on pictures or drawing on their prior knowledge related to larger themes of a text. Also, a variety of reading strategies are often employed, like shared or guided reading, read alouds, or even think alouds, in which teachers and classmates model thinking processes that accompany reading stories or texts. More recently, translanguaging—or drawing on the entirety of a student’s multilingual repertoire to scaffold language and content learning—has become increasingly popular as an approach that more equitably engages the knowledge that ELs bring, decenters a narrowly academic English focus of instruction, and positions ELs to draw on their own agency to shape their English learning experiences (Fu, Hadjiouannou & Zhou, 2019; Espinosa & Ascenzi-Moreno, 2021).

In terms of pre-pandemic challenges, ELs in U.S. public schools have generally faced economic distress not only in their communities, but also in their under-resourced schools (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). In many cases, ELs also experience stress associated with family immigration as well as a growing culture of hostility towards assumed or actual immigration status (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Migliarini & Stinson, 2020). ELs have also confronted restrictive language policies that have served to marginalize and often segregate ELs through pull-out, sheltered instruction; that perpetuate deficit perspectives towards multilingualism and linguistic diversity by narrowly focusing on academic English proficiency; and that often equate language acquisition with a learning disability (Gándara, 2020; Hass & Brown, 2019; Heineke, 2016). This has been the general context in which ELs learn across the country, and this context has been reinforced through legislation, such as California’s Proposition 227 (1998) and Arizona’s Proposition 203 (2010), which limited forms of “bilingual” education for ELs to subtractive, English-only forms. We acknowledge that it is true that dual-language or two-way bilingual education contexts are considered additive, rather than subtractive and transitional. However, students that are identified as ELs

in these classroom contexts continue to receive accommodations that were developed with the purpose of transitioning students to English-instructional contexts as quickly as possible, even if the English is only one of two languages of instruction. These sources of inequity in current approaches to supporting ELs in English-only classrooms have only been intensified by school building closures and interrupted learning brought on by the current pandemic.

Therefore, although it was already important for teachers to address these barriers by getting to know and advocating for their individual EL students in the pre-pandemic schooling context (Calderón & Slack, 2019; Samway, Pease-Álvarez, & Álvarez, 2020), this work has become even more important in remote learning circumstances, in which it has been extremely difficult to contact, reach out to, and support ELs and their families (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). Exposure to social language experiences has also been lost or severely limited during this pandemic. In the face of a lack of clear guidance and focus from school boards and districts on equity concerns for ELs, the increased reliance on teacher advocacy and outreach for ELs within the context of the pandemic becomes especially relevant (Sampson, 2019). Therefore, we aim to contribute to research that centers teacher experiences, voices, and knowledge regarding their support of ELs during this increasingly challenging and chaotic moment (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2006; Gándara et al., 2005; Téllez & Waxman, 2006; Wise, 2019).

Special Education Accommodations

Students who are eligible for special education services are identified under categories such as specific learning disability, emotional disorders, autism spectrum disorder, other health impairments, intellectual disability, speech or language impairments, orthopedic impairments, or multiple disabilities. The laws governing special education services are grounded in the Individuals with Disability Education Improvement Act (IDEA), most recently reauthorized in 2004 (Gartin & Murdic, 2005k), which guarantees free and appropriate educational services for all students, regardless of their needs. These services are implemented through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans, which constitute legally-binding agreements between teachers, parents, and administrators about individualized instruction to provide services for children with special needs (Gartin, & Murdic, 2005). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) estimates that approximately 7.1 million students are currently served under IDEA and constitute about 14% of students in public schools.

Prior to COVID-19 accommodations for students included specialized instruction in the general education classroom, specialized instruction in small groups, or self-contained services provided by a team of specialized and general education professionals. The nature of accommodations for students with disabilities urge teachers and professionals to collaborate in order to provide access to the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Alquraini, 2013). Examples of collaborations include co-teaching models of general education and SPED teachers (Da Fonte., & Barton-Arwood, 2017), inclusion models (Fuchs et al., 2015) and collaborations formed as a part of the IEP process.

This group of students also faces an array of challenges in the U.S. public education system, such as lower achievement scores compared with the general population. Many students with disabilities exhibit executive functioning difficulties - a significant predictor for academic engagement (Beker et al., 2020). Additionally, students with disabilities display communication and social differences that, when left unaccommodated, could have a negative impact on academic achievement (Hattier, & Matson, 2012). There are also mental health challenges at the family level

(Livanou et al., 2019), including increased parental stress among parents caring for children with disabilities (Hsiao, 2018; Pinquart, 2017). In addition, families of children with disabilities experience financial strain providing supportive care for their children (Jeste et al., 2020; Stabile, & Allin, 2012).

Although EL and special education students have distinct needs, this brief review illustrates that there are many similarities in the way the pandemic has affected their education. Both are groups whose educational needs are protected under state mandated accommodations but are often inequitably served in public schools, and for whom the pandemic has intensified inequities. Further, the loss of opportunities for immersive learning and socialization can potentially have a greater impact on these groups of students compared to the general student population. In both cases, caregivers without adequate training are being asked to provide services that are normally provided by specialized teachers. The teachers of both groups of students often face a lack of guidance about how to fulfill education service mandates during remote instruction. The combination of mandated accommodations, increased difficulty in fulfilling these mandates, and limited guidance from state and district administrators has created a situation in which teachers are being compelled to improvise solutions.

Our literature review, above, outlines the many challenges that were faced by teachers pre-pandemic to support their students' unique needs. The findings that we explore in the following highlight the added dimensions that educators have been facing during the pandemic such as health related stress (Oducado et al., 2021). Our findings highlight what we can learn from teachers that go beyond the challenges from the past.

Findings

The teachers working with SPED and EL students who were interviewed for this project described working through many layers of challenges. Three, however, were repeated consistently through our sample and constitute the primary findings in our analysis. First, the uneven quality or simple lack of state and district guidance was particularly formative in teachers' feeling (or not feeling) able and supported to do their work. Second, in the context of that guidance (or lack thereof), teachers faced unique challenges when working to provide accommodations they knew their EL and SPED students needed. Finally, teachers responded to these challenges through flexibility, self-directed innovation, and collaboration with other educators. Although not exhaustive, looking at these different dimensions of teachers' practice highlights the complexity of the challenges that teachers have faced in the move to remote teaching.

The findings that follow provide examples and analysis of ways in which teachers' professional knowledge, problem solving, and relationships have supported the important work of providing necessary accommodations and education for SPED and EL students during the current health crisis. Although the focus here is on serving students who need particular forms of instructional accommodations, many of the challenges described are simply more acute versions of challenges also faced by teachers generally. This does not weaken the claims being made, but instead extends their implications. SPED and EL educators serve as unintended, but still revealing, "canaries in the coal mine" of our education system. The ways in which professional flexibility, teacher collaborative problem solving, and relationship building were necessary for the teachers in our study to meet the challenges of the pandemic speaks to the ways in which these skills are critical for the wider profession.

State and District Guidance or Lack Thereof

The transition to distance learning exposed the ways in which state and district entities have a connection to the work of serving students, and ways in which that connection is sometimes weak. Overall, we found that most teachers in our sample administering SPED and EL accommodations found the state and district guidance to be lacking, unclear or overwhelming. In many cases the guidance seemed simply out of step with the realities faced by teachers and students. A few notable exceptions, where teachers were happy and/or satisfied, primarily came from small districts, or places with outstanding individual administrators who had relationships with teachers, families, and students. Although communication and guidance from the state and district level were inconsistent from district to district and state to state, a few common themes emerged: 1) A tension between the legal realities of needing to provide accommodations and support for providing them; 2) the need to follow guidelines while staying safe; 3) the difference between directives and support.

Teachers shared the experience of the tension between the need to provide services to their students and a sense of loneliness and vulnerability in the face of the absence of formal guidelines. As described by an elementary EL teacher:

There's nobody telling me specifically what to do, you know. Basically I got permission off the record from my administrator and my TSA [Teacher on Special Assignment] to do whatever I felt was best and so I'm just posting things on Seesaw and I'm doing the asynchronous things.

She goes on to explain that some of her colleagues have started adding more synchronous meetings and coursework, but she “just didn't want to add that layer of stress to my students. I just wanted them to be able to have fun and, you know, work at their own pace.” In this excerpt the teacher demonstrates the continued necessity for her to use her own judgement even in the face of lack of guidance, and colleagues making different decisions. She prioritizes student mental health and happiness over academic pressures when faced with making a choice between the two.

In one of the interviews, a SPED teacher explicitly expressed concerns about personal liability in face of regulations that cannot be followed due to the pandemic:

So I actually went to a union Zoom listening session. Like three hours long, and a big thing we brought up was a CLP [Contingency Learning Plan] is not a legal document and it's not actually amending the IEP. So I feel like a parent could still come at the district and be like, you're not following my kid's legal document, and I feel like my district would put that back on me.

While the teacher above feared the consequences of a lack of guidance and support, some teachers were overwhelmed by what they perceived to be unnecessary amounts of guidance and expectations. Said one teacher: “The paperwork, expectations that they'd given us are out-of-control crazy, because they just don't want to get sued.” Other teachers felt similarly that it was simply impossible to meet all the accommodation mandates they were handed. In an interview with a Eugene, OR Elementary EL teacher this was clear. She explained that she was given very limited blocks of time to work with multiple grade levels, and these had to be shared amongst specialist teachers (EL, SPED, speech, Title 1). She illustrated the difficulty of the district expectations when

she revealed the amount of time that the district guidance would allow in reality: “Think about it, if you're in kindergarten and you're receiving all four of those services, that whittles my time down to a minute and 25 seconds or a minute and 15 seconds.” Less than two minutes of service per accommodation is exactly the type of situation that led to feelings of being overwhelmed amongst our respondents.

These two very different experiences from teachers highlight two important points: 1) teachers feel the weight of the ways in which their work has potential legal ramifications 2) there have been both too few and too many guidelines given by the state(s). Guidelines developed without communication with teachers were often experienced as overwhelming and counter-productive for teachers, hindering teachers’ ability to support students’ unique needs.

Furthermore, teachers often felt a tension created by the lack of guidelines for doing their job and staying safe as illustrated by this elementary SPED teacher from Philadelphia, PA:

I'm worried that they're sending us into a really dangerous environment without, you know, any kind of vaccine, any kind of doctors recommending that we should be doing this. They're just like, let's see what happens.

The teacher went on to explain that she is worried about vulnerable coworkers with compromised health, people who may get ill and possibly die if they contract COVID. Referring to a vulnerable coworker, she observed: “She's also a special education teacher, and she's also doing toilet training. So like, there's no social distancing in toilet training. Right?” This example illuminates the very real dangers facing teachers still having in-person contact with students as they attempt to provide necessary accommodations. Some of the assistance offered by districts that teachers in our study found most helpful were not directives or standards, but rather support for work teachers already do. A teacher in Greenville, SC shared how happy they were that the district had just rolled out many “ESOL supports” including a translation telephone line for communicating with EL families. Others found that there were non-instructional supports offered by the district that were helpful to their students. In talking about a specific district administrator the teacher said, “She's also our equity administrator and so she's working really hard on making sure that the needs of our students are being met; their basic needs—like, they're living beings.” Although this teacher was clearly upset that there wasn’t any guidance for her regarding EL accommodations, she was also happy that there were services to help her students with basic needs such as making sure all students have food, shelter, and feel cared for.

Feeling left alone facing the inconsistency and lack of official regulations, teachers were left to generate accommodations and specialized instruction as well as to carry out the responsibility to deliver specified materials to students’ homes. In light of the lack of official guidelines, teachers were left exposed to legal liability. Teachers also faced the choice between their safety and that of their loved ones and their sense of mission to support their students. Both of these aspects added to the emotional labor of teachers' work.

Practical Challenges to Meeting Student and Family Needs

Reviewing multiple interviews, we noticed different emphases and language used by teachers serving students with special needs and teachers serving EL students when referring to implementing mandated accommodations. While SPED teachers more frequently mentioned complying

with the legal aspects of IEPs and 504 plans, teachers of ELs commonly referred to making required accommodations but shared less of a concern about lawsuits and vulnerability to liability. This difference can be partly attributed to relative political disempowerment of EL constituencies as compared to families of children with special needs as well as to the particulars of the Education of Handicapped Children Act that was reauthorized as IDEA in 1994.

Consistent across both groups, however, were concerns about meeting EL and SPED students' needs that went beyond a desire to simply comply with legal and policy mandates. Although often couched in the language of mandated services, it was clear teachers did not think policy mandates were sufficient to the task of ensuring that students' educational needs were met. In practice, the interpretation and enforcement of those mandates proved to be rather malleable. For example, families of students receiving EL and SPED services faced circumstances that inhibited the participation of students with accommodations in distance learning. Family outreach in these circumstances was frequently treated as an accommodation because, in fact, none of the required legal accommodations could be made without family communication. In some cases, though, family outreach was treated as a primary accommodation, at the expense of formal learning accommodations.

The current difficulties associated with family outreach have made the delivery of tangible materials and accommodations somewhat informal, which is a significant equity concern. The most common concerns expressed by teachers in this study had to do with student participation. These concerns focused on things like material access not only to technology but also to instructors' ability to deliver tangible and meaningful instructional accommodations. For example, in many cases EL teachers have been limited to sending accommodations home in the form of paper packets to their students or reading with students over the telephone. Some SPED teachers whose students lack printers or supplies at home have taken their own time and money to provide those students with their material needs by "driving and knocking on doors or doing door drops," as an elementary SPED teacher shared. In this case, a lack of guidance took the form of a lack of access to school facilities, as the teacher shared that "our building had been locked. No access." When faced with scarcity teachers stepped up to find ways around the lack of access they experienced, even when that meant sharing their own personal resources.

Family outreach to students receiving EL and SPED accommodations has also represented a personal challenge for many teachers, as this has been emotional labor that is mostly self-generated. This stems from a prioritization of students' wellness and mental health over academic achievement. For example, an elementary SPED teacher expressed that

I'm really concerned about some of [the students'] well-being. I mean just basic needs being able to be met. I've been in close contact with a couple of my families. I've dropped off food on their porches if they can't make it to the lunch sites.

In some cases, accommodations have taken the form of wellness checks or emotionally uplifting assignments, such as having students record themselves talking about how they are doing or simply checking in emotionally with students over messaging apps. The teachers we interviewed were acutely aware of the unique equity challenges that families were facing, which have forced many parents - and their students - to play the role of essential workers for their families, precluding their ability to fully participate in and support distance learning. For example, a Latino high school teacher who teaches a Spanish for heritage speakers class in Charlotte, NC shared that:

...it turns out that high school students are also essential workers; that's something that broke my heart. Every time I go to the store I see one or two students working. This is really sad for me because they are not even adults, and they are already essential workers. Teachers who had to balance the need to teach with the reality of students filling pressing roles for their families created another layer of difficulty- both in planning and emotionally supporting students and families.

A lack of consistent participation is also related to a loss of routines for students with accommodations, which has caused concerns for both EL and SPED teachers. Elementary SPED teachers expressed concern about the gaps that are created through interrupted learning and routines for their students. EL teachers share similar concerns, especially for newcomer students. For example, an elementary EL teacher shared that,

I have a couple of newcomers; one of them that enrolled during the pandemic. I've never even met her, and I can't screen her to make sure she qualifies for services. So I'm left making a huge assumption that she's going to [qualify] because she's a kindergartener from Mexico.

The weight of these challenges for students and for teachers themselves was explained by this elementary reading interventionist who said,

I have had horrible anxiety- from the beginning of it, I didn't feel like there was any way that we could be equitable to our students. I didn't feel like even all of our efforts really paid off very well, and personally I've been having a hard time with it, so, yeah it's been difficult.

As this teacher expresses so clearly, despite best efforts the continued rapid transitions of the pandemic compounded inequities, and this knowledge is, for many teachers, a difficult emotional burden to bear.

To summarize, the unique practical challenges of outreach to EL and SPED students and their families made consistent engagement with learning less accessible for students as well as hampered teachers' efforts to provide tangible and meaningful instructional accommodations. The work of this outreach, and the awareness that students' basic material and learning needs were not being met despite best efforts, resulted in an intensification of teachers' emotional labor. Finally, the loss of routines for students with accommodations due to decreased accessibility caused concerns for both EL and SPED teachers.

Teacher Innovation and Collaboration

Many challenges teachers reported upon were practical, and others were more personal in nature. As highlighted above, teachers expressed concerns about access to tangible teaching materials as well as exhaustion from the emotional labor of teaching children during a pandemic. These challenges also included, in some cases, difficulties in collaborating with other teachers and administrators to generate and deliver tangible accommodations and materials. In many instances, however, we found that: 1) teachers working together was an essential component in accommodating the needs of both EL and SPED students, 2) the close relationships with both parents and students cultivated by EL and SPED instructors was an essential means of meeting needs during

the pandemic, and 3) teachers were the driving force in finding innovative solutions for their students during the pandemic.

The educators with whom we spoke repeatedly remarked that the key to meeting the needs of all of their students was working collaboratively with their peer teachers. As one high school Spanish teacher from Charlotte, NC put it: “I mean, teachers here have been very resourceful and very generous to share. It’s just a community of people trying to make the best out of this situation.” This resourcefulness and generosity amongst teachers was common amongst our interviewees.

In the current context in which family outreach and accommodations are almost entirely teacher-led and teacher-generated, having the time and ability to work together becomes an essential factor in delivering equitable and effective accommodations. Sometimes, this collaboration stems from close friendships among teachers. For example, an elementary SPED teacher in Tacoma, WA reported that

I have a close friend who teaches life skills at the school right next door to mine, and she and I have been doing so much together. We’ve been working a lot during the school year together because she teaches third through fifth, so our kids are at similar levels.

This was also true for a high school Spanish teacher in Bowling Green, KY:

The SPED teacher is a really good friend. He is like an advisor to me right now. And when it comes to the ESL teachers, I worked for our ESL department for like three or four years, so I am always in contact with the head of the department and all the other aids and teachers that work there.

In these cases, existing bonds and friendships made meeting the needs of students and supporting each other as professionals possible.

A SPED teacher working primarily with students in full inclusion classes shared their team approach to support and preparation for hybrid learning:

But as teachers we’ve had time, too—because every Friday is asynchronous learning. And we’re in meetings. So we can actually have every week an inclusion initiative meeting with teachers... We’ve kind of made it like a collective where it’s like, whoever wants to join this week can join.

These collaborations between teachers served as important starting points for generating a sense of community in an otherwise isolating circumstance and for finding ways to respond to the needs of their students during the pandemic. Teachers with strong connections to their students and communities have also been essential in generating collaboration and ensuring that students are receiving the services they need, as this high school Spanish teacher from Charlotte, NC, explained:

My school has 1700 students, and it is located in a neighborhood where probably 30% or 35% of our student population are Hispanic, and we are the only two teachers who speak Spanish. So I volunteered to help my colleagues when they needed to make phone calls. They send me emails from time to time saying, “Hey, I need you to help me with this

student.” And we have a group chat where we are constantly sharing tools that we find useful.

Strong connections to the community also put teachers in a position to know their students well enough to be able to respond to their learning needs during the pandemic. For example, another high school Spanish teacher commented,

At this point, I feel like if you know your students, you know your students. That’s a good thing that we got out of the hybrid model. I spent a lot of time getting to know my students. I know how much I can give them without them shutting down.

Furthermore, we saw time and again teachers prioritizing relationships over rules, regulations and academics per se. For example, an elementary ESL teacher expressed that “I didn’t want to stress [the students] out. I wanted to keep it fun and engaging. Just like I try to keep it in my classroom.” A similar statement from a SPED elementary teacher stressed the need to make sure students and parents were engaging in social wellness: “Some were learning, some were—you know—out gardening or doing something fun...that’s totally fine right now.”

Throughout our interviews, one of the overarching themes was the need for teacher flexibility, empathy, and innovation. A high school English teacher from Phoenix, AZ illuminated the ways in which teachers and students alike have flexibly adapted to the circumstances:

It’s kind of crazy how we all adapt to it—like we’re all just like, masks are a part of life and we don’t question it. We all do social distancing like Zoom meetings. I mean the kids especially have been just like super flexible with it, but I mean it’s not all been like sunshine and roses right?—Really it’s not. It’s not like true teaching, so I really hope that when next year comes along, we’re not doing this. But as far as I know, there’s people who’ve had it much worse.

A similar sentiment was echoed by a third-grade general education teacher in Tucson, AZ who worked with her EL and SPED specialists to make sure students were getting accommodations when she said, “I mean it wasn’t true teaching, but I think we did an okay job.” Like many teachers, she knew that the lessons were not to her usual standards, but she also felt happy that her team was able to work collaboratively to accommodate all students. Teachers in this study frequently took the lead in preparing for multiple contingencies to ensure students were getting the accommodations they needed, as is clear from this elementary ELD teacher who said, “I started to really work on creating rubrics for my students so that when I was able to start teaching, I had some sort of system to collect data for grading.” This same teacher also expressed how these contingency plans should go beyond the immediate context of the pandemic or distance learning in order to have long lasting impacts for her students, such as creating a project to better identify EL true peers, which are those students who do not just have similar language proficiency levels, but also similar cultural and experiential backgrounds, saying,

I’ve also been able to work on one of my side projects, which is identifying true peers within the EL population. And I’ve been working on it with other ELD teachers in town. One of the school sites said they’ve been dreaming about this for years. I’m like, then why didn’t you do it...like it only took me a pandemic to work on it.

A SPED elementary teacher shared that she started zoom recording science labs for her students aligned with their IEP goals and said, “Even though they can't be at school or it might be a zooming call instead of, you know, sitting at a table with me, it's that I'm still engaging with them.”

Some teachers acknowledged the real complexity of the tasks that both they and their students were facing and worried that some other teachers may not be willing to offer grace to students struggling. A high school Spanish teacher from Anderson, SC discussed the challenges of contacting and outfitting a newcomer EL student with technology and the skills to be able to use it effectively for schoolwork. This teacher recognized that flexibility was required for understanding the unique challenges facing the student and said, “I knew two teachers were not really understanding. Some teachers are reluctant to provide that extra help.” In this interview the teacher highlighted the ways in which the needs of EL students can require teachers to go above and beyond expectations, and some are just not able or willing to offer that at this, or certain, times.

An important tension showed up consistently in the broader study of which this article is a part. Firstly, it is worth celebrating the extraordinary giving and innovation of the teachers teaching during this pandemic. However, it is unrealistic to expect that teachers will be able to meet all of the new needs arising as a consequence of the pandemic through individual effort and creativity alone. The effort to meet these needs with minimal institutional support comes at a cost to teachers. Additionally, when those needs are not met, it is teachers who bear the closest witness to the suffering of students and families, which can also take a toll on teachers' mental health and well-being.

The work of designing and developing responses to the challenges of providing learning materials and accommodations to EL and SPED students, as well as the emotional labor of teaching and connecting with students during a pandemic, have been undertaken primarily by teachers according to those interviewed in this study. Although some teachers have experienced difficulties collaborating with their colleagues to plan for how best to meet the needs of their students, teachers reported on the many ways in which teacher-led collaboration enabled the delivery of meaningful accommodations during such a challenging time. The fact that these collaborations were most often organized, and their purposes determined by teachers makes sense. It is teachers who have the most familiarity with the communities and families of their EL and SPED students and so can see their unique needs as they emerge. Teachers' abilities to maintain flexibility and share response strategies has also been important in a tumultuous and unstable period of teaching and learning. These insights into teacher collaboration during a pandemic, in relation to challenges associated with district and state guidance as well as family outreach, have important implications for educators, administrators, and researchers involved in EL and SPED education.

Implications and Conclusion

To review, this research project was grounded in the assumption that teachers have a uniquely valuable perspective on the impact the pandemic is having on the instruction of students who need learning accommodations (Cochran-Smith & Demers, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Clandinin, Caine, & Lessard, 2018; Clandinin, 2019; Craig, 2018; Elbaz, 2018; Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016; Rosiek & Gleason, 2019). Previous research has highlighted the many challenges faced by students and teachers in a pre-pandemic world. By listening to teachers in multiple locations across the USA, we have documented many practical impacts of state and district guidance

(or lack thereof) for teaching EL and SPED students during the pandemic. Teachers recounted to us what types of supports would be needed to fulfill district and state standards and the ways in which teachers are rising to address those challenges. These findings go beyond pre-pandemic research to illuminate the unique situation that educators face now.

Our first finding, that both a lack of supportive administrative guidance and overwhelming amounts of litigious, impersonal guidance had negative impacts on teachers' practice, should be illuminating for administrators. The teachers we interviewed consistently reported that they needed open communication and dialogue with administrators so plans and expectations could be informed by accurate ideas about teachers', students', and families' needs. Although teachers did want more support and general guidance, based on the responses we received, districts would not be well-advised to over-prescribe teacher actions or require excessive paperwork as a means of ensuring delivery of instructional services.

What teachers wanted and appreciated most was material support from districts, such as easily accessible translation services. SPED teachers who are still providing in-person service to students worried about balancing the need to provide necessary accommodations with taking precautions for their health and well-being (Oducado et al., 2021). Schools need to take all precautions necessary to help protect the health of teachers while providing accommodations, even and especially during necessary skills training such as toilet training. It is our sincere hope that proper PPE, according to CDC and other health administrations' guidance, is being administered to teachers who must do in-person accommodations for outreach. It is also our sincere hope that teachers are being provided practically useful and immediately relevant professional programming as opposed to being provided only with periodically changing updates about requirements.

Additionally, we found that teachers benefitted practically from collaboration with other educators. Teachers reported that other teachers were the most consistent source of effective adaptations to the rapidly changing conditions of teaching during the pandemic. This was often contrasted with the unhelpful nature of highly prescriptive policies that lacked flexibility and were not informed by the nature of the work teachers faced. Teachers found material support from their districts for work they were already doing to be of the most value. Both EL and SPED teachers reported needing support for communicating with and reaching out to students and families.

Many of our interviews additionally suggested that more than material support was needed for such outreach. SPED and EL teachers in our study found that they were doing a significantly increased amount of emotional labor for their students. Given that EL and SPED students often faced additional financial and academic burdens pre-pandemic, the additional emotional and practical load faced by families during the pandemic has meant more labor for educators. Furthermore, many teachers were overwhelmed largely because of the size and intensity of their caseload- a problem often faced pre-pandemic but intensified with peers needing extra support during the pandemic. We recommend that closer attention be paid to mental health support for educators facing these increased burdens. Additional funding and hiring of additional staff are also strongly recommended to help alleviate this burden.

Finally, the similarities identified here are relevant to the design and content of teacher preparation. Although it may be necessary for SPED or EL instructors to acquire specialized expertise, it is important to stress the connections between these areas of service, as well as the connections with general education (Da Fonte., & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Fuchs et al., 2015). The set up of our literature review with EL and SPED as separate sections is reflective of current research on these disciplines, and largely how these subjects are taught in universities. Teacher preparation

programs would be well served to facilitate professional learning communities amongst their future teachers and to create explicit time for collaboration across these specializations in their educational programming. The findings presented here suggest some promising foci for such collaboration and shared study, most notably outreach to families and adaptation of guidance for accommodations to unforeseen circumstances (Alquraini, 2013). In conclusion, we are left in awe at the work so many educators are doing, especially EL and SPED specialists. Although we are aware of the way the pandemic has resulted in lapses in services to EL and SPED students, our research suggests a strength-based rather than deficit-based approach to teachers during this, and any similar crisis is more likely to have a positive impact. Rather than focusing on providing prescriptive guidance in rapidly changing circumstances, our research suggests that district, state and federal decision makers would be wise to facilitate and support teacher-led efforts to design adaptations that meet the needs of their circumstances. Additionally, we recommend that there be greater consideration of the material and emotional support teachers need to provide students and families with SPED and EL programming during this pandemic and any similar future crises.

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