How One Teacher Preparation Program Addressed Its Students' Needs During the "New Normal"

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted society. The effects of COVID-19 on the identification, evaluation, delivery of services, and on due process rights of children with disabilities and their parents are most probably adverse, though far from fully understood. Teacher preparation programs, with so much involvement with schools, have been especially disrupted. In this article the researchers share how their special education department was impacted by the pandemic and how they responded to provide rigorous online courses, clinical placements, advising, and other supports for their undergraduate and graduate students. The article concludes with implications and recommendations to the field.

Keywords: *Special Education, Teacher Preparation Program, Online Learning, Covid-19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of society including higher education and especially teacher preparation programs where interaction in schools is vital to meeting program outcomes. What then happens when public schools switch to online learning and universities shutter and resume as distance learning entities? Like many other institutions, that is the question and situation the researchers faced in the spring of 2020 and continued to address in 2021.

The authors are special education (SPED) faculty of a mid-sized state school in New England. This institution is known for its quality programming, affordability, accessibility and attention to first generation college students. The authors' department serves a diverse student body across three undergraduate programs and nine graduate master's and certificate programs. As of March 2021, there were 77 students enrolled in the undergraduate programs and 90 at the graduate level. In addition to serving the department's student population, also provides courses for cross-disciplinary programs, including but not limited to coursework within the school of nursing and other school of education majors. Department faculty are major professors and serve on the doctoral committees of students in the joint University of Rhode Island-RIC Ph.D. program. Faculty are also involved with various scholarship activities and service both on-and-off campus, and are especially committed to their students, public schools, and communities.

When the pandemic shut down the state in March 2020, almost all of the College's courses and offices switched to online learning. All in person field placements were stopped and continued virtually if possible, while a one-week planning period was given to faculty and staff to prepare for online instruction. The disruption to the semester took a toll on faculty, staff, and students alike across teaching and learning, support services, and campus activities. Despite all these barriers, the pandemic did bring new opportunities to the College. For example, it created the need for

faculty to learn new technologies, new ways of collaboration, as well as avenues to support the students.

Based on these problems, the research questions were: How does a postsecondary teacher preparation program provide a high-quality program for preservice educators under COVID-era restrictions and regulations? What were the researchers' personal experiences during the pandemic related to teaching, advising, etc.? How did teaching strategies and course content evolve as time went on? How did faculty problem solve during the pandemic and continue to think about supporting teacher candidates moving forward?

To answer these questions the researchers completed an autoethnographic work over a 5-month time frame. Ellis et al. (2011) defined autoethnography as:

> An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product. (p. 273)

Four-out-of-seven faculty members in the Special Education Department conducted this study. The authors collected data by self-reflection, note taking, informal observations in their classes, and by reviewing course evaluation data. They also met as a writing team approximately every three weeks to discuss the data, further explored each experience, and then related them to the wider phenomenon of working online during the pandemic.

This manuscript is organized as follows: the authors begin by considering SPED law and then discuss the pandemic's impact on the College's Programs. Next, a detailed response to these issues including a focus on teaching, relationship building, and clinical placements follows. The conclusion includes implications for research and practice, recommendations to the field, and resources.

Legal Aspects of Educating Students with Disabilities

The sweeping and adverse effects of COVID-19 on virtually all aspects of life, the lives of students and their families, and on general and SPED continues to be pervasive. On the one hand, children with disabilities and their parents have substantial rights that were initially provided by Congress in 1975 through the passage of P.L. 94-142. These rights have continued and, in some cases, have been broadened under subsequent laws including P.L. 101-476, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 1990), P.L. 105-17, IDEA- reauthorized, (1997) and P.L. 108-446, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004).

However, public schools are laboring under highly unusual circumstances to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities by continuing to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) within the least restrictive environment (LRE) through the implementation of the necessary supports and services to provide specially designed instruction. The responsibilities faced by school administrators, teachers, parents, and students with disabilities is intensive and overwhelming. Moreover, due to the implications and health risks associated with COVID-19 (especially to the medically fragile population), continued distance learning has had an ever increasing impact on service delivery and supports as it relates to providing FAPE. As faculty members

who are engaged in the process of preparing beginning teachers to assume professional responsibilities in the field of SPED, what are the responsibilities of colleges and universities? Is it appropriate for colleges and universities to address potential legal issues facing school personnel due to COVID-19?

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the field's historical and current leading professional association, provides guiding standards for the preparation of initial special educators as well as advanced and specialty sets of standards (CEC, 2020). All sets include standards pertaining to legal and ethical aspects of SPED. For example, Standard 1 from the 2020 Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators (Initial K-12 Standards) states:

> Standard 1: Engaging in Professional Learning and Practice within Ethical Guidelines
> Candidates practice within ethical and legal guidelines; advocate for improved outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities and their families while considering their social, cultural, and linguistic diversity; and engage in ongoing self-reflection to design and implement professional learning activities.
>
> > 1.1 Candidates practice with ethical guidelines and legal practices and procedures.
> > 1.2 Candidates advocate for improved outcomes for individuals with exceptionalities and their families while addressing the unique needs of those with diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
> > 1.3 Candidates design and implement professional learning activities based on ongoing analysis of student learning; self-reflection; and professional standards, research, and contemporary practices. (Standard 1 para.)

CEC standards also create additional focus upon the importance of enabling the College's teacher candidates (TC) to appreciate legal issues pertinent to SPED. So, what issues can and should be raised about the impact of COVID-19 on SPED? The following are just some of the questions that are being addressed through due process hearings, District Court cases and even Appellate Court matters:

1. Issues pertaining to referrals and how COVID-19 has impacted the referral process?
2. Issues pertaining to evaluations including but not limited to psychological, educational, speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, etc. To what degree are remote evaluations valid, given that formal tests have been normed under face-to face conditions? Can ZOOM evaluations be challenged legally because the tests may not be valid under remote administration?
3. What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the individualized education program (IEP) development? More specifically, what are the implications of meaningful parental involvement under remote meeting conditions?
4. To what degree are there issues about IEPs being implemented in the least restrictive environment? To what degree, are schools permitted to unilaterally provide distance learning without meaningful parent involvement or direct written permission?
5. Is providing SPED through remote learning considered to be a change of placement?
6. To what degree has COVID-19 affected staffing issues which are included within an IEP?

7. To what degree has COVID-19 adversely affected meaningful student progress academically, in social-emotional performance, physically, etc.
8. To what degree has COVID-19 impacted student attendance, creating pervasive anxiety among students, and adversely affecting social interaction among students with disabilities?

The department's TC are living the experience of educating students with disabilities in a variety of settings via in person instruction as well as distance learning. These thoughts were expressed by the graduate students who are currently participating in one course which focuses on utilizing universal design for learning to include students with disabilities within the general education setting. Additionally, student teachers are participating in a substantial number of virtual meetings related to referral, evaluation, eligibility, IEP development, and reevaluation. They have seen first-hand the effects of chronic absenteeism for students on their caseloads as articulated and reflected upon in their course assignments.

Reviewing current case law on matters pertaining to COVID-19 and the education of students with disabilities is merited. The purpose of this section is not to conduct and share detailed litigation that is pending or even that has resulted in recent court rulings. However, it should be noted that there are several legal matters pertaining to SPED practices under COVID-19. Some examples of current litigation include:

1. Class action suit re: declaration that the state officials violated the constitutional rights of all students in 10 districts by prohibiting in-person instruction without a hearing or reasonable justification. *Lujan Grisham,* 120 LRP 40165 (D.N.M. 12/18/20), *appeal filed* (10th Cir. 12/23/20) (No. 20-2176).
2. The parents of students with disabilities from 14 states sued every state and local education agency (LEA) in the country over their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They claim the districts denied the students FAPE by closing schools for in-person instruction based upon IDEA, Section 504, ADA and Section 1983 (IDEA &14th Amendment) *J.T. v. de Blasio*, No. 20 Civ. 5878 (S.D.N.Y. 07/28/20, *complaint filed*). 2nd District, New York. The parents asked the 2d U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to review the District Court's dismissal of their complaint in *J.T. v. de Blasio*,_77 IDELR 252 (S.D.N.Y. 2020), appeal filed (2d Cir. 12/14/20) (No. 20-4128). Unlike the original lawsuit, which named every state education agency (SEA) and LEA in the country as defendants, the appeal focused on select SEAs, LEAs, and state-run SPED schools. Dec 14, 2020.
3. The parents of six unrelated students with disabilities sued the Clark County (NV) School District, its superintendent, and one of its region superintendents on behalf of all Nevada students eligible for SPED services. According to the parents, the district and its administrators violated the students' IDEA and Section 504 rights by failing to offer an option other than virtual instruction at the start of the 2020-21 school year. On November 19, 2020, the District Court denied the parents' motion for a preliminary injunction that would require the district to resume in-person instruction and return to its pre-pandemic state of operations. Nev. 11/19/20). *C.M. v. Jara*, No. 2:20-1562-JCM-DJA (D. Nev. 08/21/20, *complaint filed*).
4. The U.S. Education Department (USDOE) acknowledged that social distancing measures and other limitations during the pandemic may make administering most in-

> person evaluations impracticable and may place limitations on how evaluations and assessment are conducted under IDEA Part C during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Thus, the Department highlights the option of using medical records, when appropriate, to establish eligibility without conducting an evaluation. However, the lead agency or EIS provider must still conduct an appropriate assessment of the child and a family-directed assessment." *Questions and Answers on Part C Evaluation Timelines During* COVID-19, 120 LRP 20043 (OSEP 07/06/20).

Please note, the above summaries were obtained through LRP's Special Education Connection. LRP's Special Education Connection provides thorough and extensive summaries of pending and current legal issues pertaining to the education of students with disabilities. In summary, SPED during these pandemic times poses a substantial challenge for school administrators, general and SPED teachers, related services professionals, parents and students with disabilities. It is the authors' opinion that students in our undergraduate and graduate programs need to gain an understanding of these legal issues that have been created through the adverse impact on COVID-19 on FAPE within the LRE.

Clearly, leadership from the USDOE (through Office of Special Education Programs & the Office of Civil Rights) is needed to guide states and LEAs to make sure that despite the challenges that COVID-19 present, that school districts will guarantee that students with disabilities participate in meaningful education that helps ensure FAPE is implemented within the LRE. Our TC need to appreciate federal and state policies that address these concerns.

Within their classes, SPED professors are striving to share the potential adverse effects of COVID-19 on the process of identification, evaluation, service delivery, and due process rights of students with disabilities and their parents by citing direct examples shared by parents. After providing the examples, professors are posing questions for TC to consider as it relates to the aforementioned topics and what their thoughts are regarding the impact of COVID-19. A discussion then ensues.

Depending upon the experience and developmental level of the TC, conversations range from speculation to real world experience and examples. In their roles as clinical supervisors, faculty are also engaged in conversations with their student teachers on topics such as procedural safeguards, informed written consent, FAPE, and LRE. Although SPED services are being delivered to students with disabilities, the quality and intensity of such services are at issue for many children. School districts are laboring under substantial pressure to comply with federal and state regulations on SPED under adverse conditions exacerbated by COVID-19.

Since the passage and implementation of P.L. 94-142, the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1975 (implemented in part in October 1977 and in part in October 1978), professors have had an obligation to review various components of the law. Additionally, professors have had, and continue to have, the responsibility to provide training and support for their undergraduate and graduate level TC to gain knowledge and skills about the process of identification of students with disabilities, assessment and evaluation, the development of IEPs and evaluation procedures for children and youth with disabilities.

With the advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent emergence of distance learning, distance evaluation team meetings, distance IEP meetings, and other on-line parent-teacher interactions, SPED professors have been faced with preparing students for their roles and responsibilities for uncertain and clearly different times. While guidance for practicum students and especially student teachers occurs at a district level, faculty members also assume a primary responsibility to prepare

TC for meeting their responsibilities under vastly different circumstances than have been previously encountered.

The emerging body of case law that continues to interpret school department requirements under COVID-19 has become an important source of information. To that end, faculty members have been addressing the roles and responsibilities of our teacher candidates in the identification, assessment, evaluation, team participation, and IEP development and implementation during COVID-19.

The faculty continue to grapple with issues created by COVID-19 as they pertain to the education of students with disabilities in inclusive and more restrictive school environments. The ethical and legal obligations of school personnel during COVID-19 times have created a dilemma for school officials amidst some parental concerns that the SPED needs of their children are not being met. To that end, TC need to be aware of the issues involved and their present and future responsibilities in addressing such challenges.

Focus on Teaching

As the COVID-19 global pandemic swept the country, the College's faculty were preparing to return to campus and classes after the March 2020 spring break. Sadly, due to COVID-19's widespread and deadly impact, the campus was closed for face-to-face courses and faculty members were asked to prepare remaining coursework for virtual delivery, with hopes of the pandemic blowing over and the opportunity to return to campus. As the weeks went by, the decision was made that all courses would be delivered virtually for the remainder of the semester, and then, a decision was made that courses would also be delivered virtually for summer and fall of 2020, continuing into the spring and summer 2021 semesters. The primary focus of this section is to provide insight related to the changes made in teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to virtual learning.

Lifelong Learners: How Faculty Grew & Developed as Educators During a Pandemic

Looking back and reflecting on the implications this pandemic would have on teaching, it is fair to say that at its onset, most people would not and could not fathom that we would still be operating under COVID-19 restrictions a full year later. During this time, many realities as they pertained to teaching came to light. First, faculty members, administrators, the general public, and corporations came to the stark realization of inequity as it relates to accessibility of devices and the internet for students (across the lifespan). Second, many learned that teaching and learning in a virtual environment presents unique challenges. Third, a new emphasis on professional development and research was placed on engaging students in virtual learning environments. Fourth, many local, state, and federal agencies were adamant on the return of students (K-12) to the classrooms for the 2020-2021 school year. Therefore strategic planning committees were developed for the reopening of schools. Each of these key points played an important role in how coursework and field experiences were delivered to students in teacher preparation programs.

Interestingly, while the pandemic would certainly impact teaching and learning, initial data does not show a reduction in the Department's enrollment from pre-pandemic semester levels compared to fully online semesters for our undergraduate students (See Table 1). In reality, the opposite occurred with an increase in admitted students. However, these increased numbers may be due to the fact that some students were conditionally admitted as they could not take the required

entrance praxis exam due to COVID-19. A decrease in student teachers was seen in Spring 2021, however, more data and investigation is needed to fully understand these trends. With overall enrollment not decreasing, this meant that focus on teaching and clinical practice would still remain on larger numbers and therefore more student need.

Table 1: ***Undergraduate SPED Enrollment***

Semester	Admitted	Dropped/ Switched	Student Teachers
Fall 19	15	2	11
Spring 20	9	1	14
Fall 20*	22	4	16
Spring 21*	18	2	9

Note: *=fully online semester; Admitted=number of students admitted into the BS in Elementary/Special Education program; Dropped/Switched=number of students who either dropped out of the program or switched to another major; Student teachers=number of BS program students completing a student teaching experience.

At the onset of the pandemic, many faculty members moved their courses fully online, adjusting the intensity of instruction through pre-recorded lectures, increased materials, and strategies. Other faculty taught synchronously online each week on the same day and time of their typical face-to-face class. Still others offered a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences.

Difficulties emerged in cases where assignments sought collaboration with outside entities such as families, schools, and community organizations. For example, one graduate student within the Department was at a loss to conduct a required family interview. She stated that she did not know of any parents who had a child with disabilities. The faculty member realized that with COVID-19 ever present, arranging such an interview would be difficult. This faculty member used his extensive experience in conducting family interviews, recalling observations, teacher consultation, and results of several evaluations to role-play a parent of a child with an intellectual disability and thus enabled his graduate student to successfully complete her family interview via ZOOM. Other faculty also created case studies to present virtually to their students.

During the virtual synchronous class meeting times, there were growing pains. Faculty and students spent time adjusting to the new technologies. One specific challenge faculty experienced was varying levels of student participation within their online classrooms. While this also occurs in a face-to-face environment, as supported by Waghid et al. (2016), the format of an online classroom learning environment poses additional attendance and participation issues in that "the possibility exists that they can withdraw whenever the desire, or even disrupt the pedagogic encounters on the grounds that they cannot be curbed in their actions" (Waghid et al., 2016, p. 6).

For example, while some students left their cameras on throughout the class, it is not a requirement; in fact, for several reasons, the College has a policy stating that students do not have to have their cameras on during virtual learning. Therefore, it is difficult for faculty to know if students are understanding the content or even sitting in front of the computer unless the students are actively engaging with verbal responses or the utilization of the chat feature. As individuals slowly began teaching to black screens with only a handful of individuals who left their camera on, it became more challenging to involve students in active participation. The unknowns (e.g., is the student there; is the student understanding) directly impacts the faculty member's ability to formatively assess student learning, knowledge, and understanding of content. Participation varied

for many reasons including whether it was an undergraduate or graduate course, type of course, comfort level with technology, etc.

Nonetheless, faculty members incorporated some strategies identified by the Office of Education Technology (OET, 2017). Considerations were made surrounding the engagement of learners, improved methods for teaching with technology, and putting systems in place within the virtual environment to impact student success (OET, 2017). One example to counter the impact of reduced participation was that one faculty member elected to utilize a virtual participation wheel through which students could be selected randomly to make meaningful contributions.

The students were provided with a set of ten chapter-based questions prior to class so that they could prepare. Thus, not only could students volunteer to share their ideas and questions but could also contribute to class discussion through the application of the PowerPoint participation wheel. Another faculty member began her course in teaching students about questioning the norm and doing research to grow and learn. She also wanted to ensure that students had the opportunity to build relationships with their peers despite being online.

In order to accomplish this, she utilized various small discussion opportunities such as the use of ZOOM breakout rooms and then large group discussions to build on the conversations held during the small group sessions. Shared Google Docs or Jamboards were often utilized by small groups while in breakout rooms for increased collaboration. Additionally, small groups never had the same student members; this provided the opportunity for the students to meet many individuals in their class. Furthermore, special attention to course organization and clarity of assignments and expectations was made to encourage student access and success.

During the 2020 spring and fall semesters, faculty members placed significant focus on engaging students in the virtual learning environment. According to CEC (2020), it is the responsibility of educators to "create safe, inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments so that individuals with exceptionalities become active and effective learners and develop emotional well-being, positive social interactions, and self-determination" (Initial Preparation Standard 2 Learning Environments Section, p. 1). The SPED faculty members not only taught these standards to TC, but also modeled appropriate behaviors and teaching practices in their courses. Therefore, in order to increase participation, an emphasis was made to create a safe learning environment within the virtual classroom to build positive relationships and encourage active and successful learners.

Some faculty members posed questions or problem-solving activities for students to address via email in order to enhance participation among students who seem less inclined to participate during ZOOM classes. At least one faculty member began to pose questions through course announcements via Blackboard to encourage participation of each and every class member with some but not total success. The Department's learning management system (LMS), Blackboard, offers the options for faculty members to post and sequence announcements. Announcements include the option to post hyperlinks of various documents relevant to assignments or class discussions. Through such communication students have what they need to address an assignment or a discussion without having to search through cumbersome course files. Another faculty member asked students to complete a semester-long Community of Practice (CoP) assignment which required them to join a particular Facebook group (e.g., Rhode Island Science of Reading) or create a Twitter account and follow particular individuals. Updates were shared in class and via the announcements (i.e., upcoming professional development opportunities) and discussion board features within Blackboard which often resulted in lively virtual conversations, especially if two (or more) TC highlighted the same post or Tweet. Many of these undergraduate students reported via

mid-point surveys and course evaluations that participating in the CoP Assignment was particularly meaningful and engaging.

To foster this safe, supportive, yet rigorous learning environment, the researchers used a variety of technologies and practices. Online learning took place over platforms such as Google Meet, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Classroom, and then ultimately ZOOM was available to all of the College's faculty. Apps and online resources such as Jamboard, Nearpod, Screencast-O-Matic, VoiceThread, and Kahoot were implemented to provide a variety of resources and options for course instructors to deliver instruction, provide practice opportunities, and assess student learning (see Table 2 for information about these & other resources). In addition, students not only gained exposure to examples of instructional technologies, they were also able to learn from or develop assignments using these resources and options. Moreover, in some instances, students were provided the option of which platform to demonstrate their understanding in order to provide students choice of assignment submission options through a playlist selection format.

Table 2: ***Resource List***

Tool	Web Address	Cost	Brief Description
Visme	https://www.visme.co/	Free, can be upgraded at a price	Visme is a cloud-based visual content creation and collaboration platform, empowering anyone to create professional, branded content no matter their design background (Visme, 2021).
Padlet	https://padlet.com/	Free, can be upgraded at a price	Padlet allows you to create different boards for students and families to interact in an online environment. It is also a great organizational tool and resource for sharing information (Padlet, n.d.).
FlipGrid	https://info.flipgrid.com/	Free, can be upgraded at a price	Flipgrid is a free video discussion board where students and educators can post video responses to questions (Flipgrid, 2021).
SeaSaw	https://web.seesaw.me/	Free, can be upgraded at a price	Seesaw is a virtual classroom platform where teachers are able to develop portfolios for students and whole classes surrounding topics discussed in class. Parents are then provided access to the portfolios for their own review (Seasaw, 2021).
Kahoot	https://kahoot.com	Free, can be upgraded for a price	Kahoot is a game-based learning platform that can be utilized in class or to engage students virtually for practice or assessment purposes (Kahoot, 2021).

Screencast-O-Matic	https://screencast-o-matic.com	Free, can be upgraded for a price	Screencast-O-Matic enables educators and students to create videos for a variety of purposes such as flipped/blended learning, video conversations, student assignments, and feedback (Screencast-O-Matic, 2021).
Socrative	https://www.socrative.com	Free, can be upgraded for a price	An online application that allows educators to create assessments to review student understanding at the class, individual student, or question-level, and to provide immediate feedback to their students on course content (Socrative, 2021).
Quizlet	https://quizlet.com	Free, can be upgraded for a price	An online application that allows students to study through the use of flashcards as well as games and tests. Educators and/or students can input content (Quizlet, 2021).
Jamboard	https://jamboard.google.com/	Free	Jamboard is a Google Product that is used for virtual collaborative work. Users can write, draw and upload pics and other files while the work is saved instantly.
VoiceThread	https://voicethread.com	Free, can be upgraded for a price	VoiceThread is web-based presentation software that allows educators and students to create interactive multimedia presentations. It can also be used for assessments. Media created in other platforms such as PowerPoint, Google, and Screencast-O-Matic can be uploaded into this platform, and a VoiceThread can be created (VoiceThread, 2021).

Faculty were encouraged to create and send welcome videos to students prior to the start of the semester. Most faculty used Blackboard prior to the pandemic; after March 2020, this virtual learning environment became critical to course success. Additionally, once courses were underway, it was important to organize them in a manner that students could easily find and navigate lessons, assignments, and other important resources within the virtual classroom. Therefore, prior to the fall 2020 semester, faculty spent additional time creating courses that were user friendly.

Some faculty members also participated in professional development opportunities offered through the College or through outside organizations such as Quality Matters before and throughout the semester with a specific emphasis on teaching within a virtual environment including but

not limited to how to design accessible courses and learning new online platforms that could be incorporated into the structure of the course curriculum.

For example, in addition to improving her own online course delivery, one faculty member wanted to provide her students the opportunity to be equally prepared for the online learning environment. She embedded a series of brief assignments that provided modules from Harvard's edX® program which focused on how students could be successful online learners (edX®, n.d.). Additionally, she challenged her students to be curious learners by encouraging them to explore questions they had and not to take each concept presented to them at face value (Markowitz, 2005). In his analysis of the progress of educational technology, Spector (2020) believed that in general, as it relates to incorporating educational technology there is more that can be done. Spector (2020) stated:

> After all, that is our job as human beings—namely, to bring out the best in others by whatever means we can manage to do so, with new technology, with old technology, with a new pair of walking boots, or with a map of middle earth. We can do better as educators and educational technology researchers. (p. 835)

Each day educators try to do better by thinking of students, their needs, and how to empower them to be successful lifelong learners.

Focus on Relationship Building

One of the cornerstones of SPED practice is the importance of partnerships with families and relationship building (CEC, 2020; Division of Early Childhood [DEC], 2014; DEC, 2020; IDEIA, 2004; Rhode Island Board of Regents, Elementary and Secondary Education. 2007). Furthermore, building positive relationships in educational settings with students is critical to ensuring a healthy environment conducive to learning for each individual in the classroom (Harms et al., 2006; Willis, 2009). In the following section, strategies for building relationships with teacher candidates in fully virtual environments are discussed.

Relationship Building During COVID-19 Online Teaching

In survey research conducted by the first author and a small group of cross-disciplinary educators after the spring 2020 semester, findings indicated that students missed the face-to-face opportunities and closeness to not only their peers but the professor as well (Zoll et al., 2021). Over the summer of 2020, after receiving news that the College would return to a fully virtual learning environment in the fall, this research group wanted to develop their courses to meet the needs of their students in virtual learning environments (Zoll et al., 2021). Therefore, the group underwent an intensive investigation of their own teaching practices using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Model (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2006).

The overall premise of the AI model is that one follows a 5-D Cycle in which they (a) define the issue, (b) discover what they do well, (c) dream about what they would like to see occur, (d) design their dream, and (e) deliver the newly formatted plan (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2006). One specific facet of teaching that each faculty member considered was how to build relationships with students to ensure a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943) in a virtual environment. Unlike the

spring semester, the fall semester would begin and end in a virtual format, eliminating the opportunity for the professors to build relationships in a face-to-face environment.

In order to help ensure students had the opportunity to engage with the professor, peers, and provide opportunities for the students to build relationships with individuals in the classroom, one professor decided to incorporate a variety of techniques during synchronous meetings. This professor chose to utilize ZOOM for course delivery. During lectures TC were provided tasks or questions and then placed into ZOOM breakout rooms in order to have small group discussions, complete scavenger hunts, analyze documents or statements, and a variety of other tasks. This provided students the opportunity to take risks with a smaller audience, explore their curiosities, learn from more knowledgeable others, and develop responses and hypothesis to varying questions, concepts, and ideologies of their peers (Markowitz, 2005; Piaget, 1972/2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Zoll et al., 2021).

Following each breakout room session, TC were brought back to the whole group and a discussion ensued. The professor ensured that the breakout rooms were randomly assigned each time. This meant that students were never placed in the same small group and provided the opportunity for them to engage with a variety of peers throughout the course (Zoll et al., 2021). Moreover, due to the need for relationship building and opportunities for authentic conversations amongst students, the faculty members were actively developing strategies for computer-supported collaborative learning (Koschmann, 1996).

Another concept incorporated into the semester was a coffee hour (Zoll et al., 2021). Every Thursday from 10:00-11:00 a.m., the professor was available for informal conversations via ZOOM. This time could be spent discussing life, school, or any range of topics. The purpose of this coffee hour was to provide students that "before class chat" atmosphere and offer a deeper connection that wasn't as easily developed in a large group ZOOM classroom setting and helped students develop a connection to the faculty and an overall sense of belonging within the greater classroom community (Maslow, 1943, Zoll et al., 2021).

One SPED faculty member elected to form study groups in each of his courses which focused on developing chapter study guides. The study guides were shared with the course instructor, reviewed, and shared with each class via Blackboard announcements. Each study guide was designed to facilitate collaboration and to improve mastery of course concepts as evidenced on course examinations.

Another faculty member followed the suggestion of one of his undergraduate students and implemented a Kahoot quiz as part of learning the required content. Not only was it a fun way to review content, but it clearly showed that faculty were listening to students and were also flexible enough to try new things to fit online learning. Moreover, the online learning environment allowed the faculty members to incorporate new resources, different forms of media, and in some instances guest speakers, essentially, providing students with more diversity in learning and assessment approaches (Ramirez et al., as cited in Lloyd & Barreneche, 2014).

Relationship building practices may also be informal and less time consuming. For example, one faculty member made it a point to connect with each student as they entered the ZOOM classroom (Maslow, 1943). A simple hello and question of how they were doing was meant to welcome each student, a practice done face-to-face now, performed virtually.

As previously discussed, building positive relationships and partnerships with families and children with-and-without exceptionalities is critical to the growth and development of the learner (CEC, 2020; DEC, 2014; DEC-CEC, 2020; Harms et al., 2006; IDEIA, 2004; Maslow, 1943, Rhode Island Board of Regents, Elementary and Secondary Education. 2007; Willis, 2009). While

the aforementioned techniques were developed with the TC's success in mind, they dually served as an appropriate model for TC to use in virtual settings with their own students and families (Vygotsky, 1978). As the professor modeled different tools and techniques to engage the TC in weekly course meetings and additional relationship building opportunities, TC were able to identify alternative ways in which they could also engage families within a virtual environment as well as positive teaching practices that would hold the attention of their own students (Zoll et al. 2021).

While teaching is the authors' main duty, advising students is another critical academic task. Although some of the advising had existed via online or telephone meetings prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 moved all these meetings to a virtual space. Faculty conducted advisement meetings via ZOOM, Google Meets, Blackboard Collaborate, other platforms, and typical phone calls. Virtual meetings did offer faculty the opportunity to co-advise more easily with peers from other departments if the preservice teacher was pursuing dual certification.

The knowledge of the College's programs and the courses that are required to meet programmatic requirements, even during times of COVID-19 is a critical element to addressing the needs of all students. While ZOOM advisement meetings may be rather impersonal, the degree to which faculty offered effective advisement is the degree to which they can transcend space and time and earn the continued trust of students based upon professor ability to meet their individual needs and circumstances (Maslow, 1943).

Practicum placement remained a special challenge. However, course professors assume that challenging responsibility. For those advisors who select to participate in the selection of student-teaching or graduate internship settings, COVID-19 has created special circumstances that impact upon our ability to find appropriate placements. Whether such placements are accomplished through classrooms that rely on distance learning or in person experiences, faculty have had to develop special procedures to address the needs of their students so that they can successfully meet or exceed field-based standards.

Focus on Clinical Practice

Along with just about everything else, field experiences in teacher preparation programs were altered due to COVID-19. Those involved in clinical practice are beginning to share their stories to gain a better understanding of what is currently happening (Graziano et al., 2020) and to begin to consider what supports impacted teacher candidates may need in the future (Holdeide, 2020). The following section adds to this growing conversation by providing examples of barriers to clinical practice the researchers experienced and some new endeavors that came to fruition as a result**.**

In Pursuit of Practice-Based Learning Opportunities

As is known, learning to teach is not easy and *practice-based opportunities* are essential, where expertise is developed "through repeated, well-structured opportunities to practice using knowledge and skills in authentic contexts" (Benedict et al., 2016, p. 2). Securing field placements, or practice-based opportunities, for teacher candidates is challenging under normal circumstances, and during the pandemic, traditional clinical experiences became even more difficult to secure due to numerous barriers (i.e., health, safety, & state mandates) across all levels of clinical practice with some impacted more than others (Graziano et al., 2020).

Student Teaching Level

The culminating clinical experience is student teaching which approximates the responsibilities of full-time teaching and requires TCs to demonstrate their competence in planning, implementing, and assessing learning experiences (Feinstein School of Education & Human Development [FSEHD], 2020). During this level of clinical experience, TCs exhibit professional behaviors expected of a novice teacher educator and transition from candidate to professional (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2080). Fortunately, the authors were able to move forward with student teaching for our TC over the course of the pandemic with modifications implemented on a case by case basis.

During the pandemic, student teachers learned to be patient and flexible as roles vacillated. They were observed providing instruction to face-to-face learners, remote learners, or a hybrid group of learners depending on the current realities faced at the state, district, school, and/or classroom level. Clinical supervisors were often on site with the student teacher, planning, observing, and providing feedback. Meanwhile, College supervisors watched in-progress lessons via a virtual platform such as ZOOM or Google Meets, or they were provided with a video recording of lessons to observe. Clinical supervisors, college supervisors, and TC would then meet via a virtual platform to discuss and reflect upon the experience(s).

While the use of virtual platforms have enabled college supervisors to remain in contact and provided opportunities to continue to monitor TC during their student teaching experiences, there were some challenges associated with this format. For example, real-time observations were–at times—impacted by connectivity issues, which would cause the College supervisor to miss important aspects of the lesson, or information the TC shared with the students. Video recordings often presented a different challenge (unless permission slips were collected from all student's parents/guardians), as the camera was focused solely on the student teacher and observational criteria related to the nuances of classroom life such as managing transitions were often difficult to evaluate and, thus, to provide actionable feedback. Moreover, COVID-19 also presented a challenge for student teachers related to observational criteria around creating authentic discussion due to the necessity of remaining six-feet apart and masked (although innovative techniques were observed especially in lessons with a combination of face-to-face & remote learners). Nonetheless, the authors were fortunate that their district-partners welcomed their student teachers into their schools and classroom teachers continued to embrace the role of mentor despite such uncertain times.

Practicum/Methods Level

The most impacted level of clinical experience was the practicum, or methods, level. Practicum courses are considered Level 2 (Participating & Assisting) and Level 3 (Practicum) clinical experiences during which TC are expected to take on increasing responsibility for teaching and learning. During these experiences TC hone their skills in teaching individuals, small groups and whole classes of students (i.e., using data to inform instruction) under the guidance, support, and supervision of highly skilled educators (FSEHD, 2020). At these levels, courses are defined by *coursework-aligned, field based practice opportunities*, or clinical experiences that are components of, or are closely aligned with, program coursework (Benedict et al., 2016).

Although many districts were able to welcome student teachers, the risks of hosting practicum level TC for methods courses outweighed the benefits for all of partnership districts. The challenge presented due to limited opportunities for practice-based opportunities at Level 2 and

Level 3 clinical experiences was twofold: (a) the bridge between the observational level and the student teaching level of clinical experiences was compromised, and (b) major course projects, or artifacts, were significantly altered due to their close alignment with field experiences. Oftentimes, this resulted in the use of mock data sets provided by the course instructor as the basis for the major projects rather than authentic experiences.

Typically, the department's TC complete approximately 150 hours (if pursuing Mild to Moderate Disabilities certification) and 220 hours (if pursuing Mild to Moderate & Significant Intellectual Disabilities) of course-aligned, field-based practice opportunities at the undergraduate level prior to student teaching. In speaking with one TC recently whose first semester in the program aligned with the outbreak of the pandemic, she reported completing 19 hours (vs. the typical 30 hours) in spring 2020 and roughly 63 hours (vs. 120 hours) over the subsequent two semesters to date (see Table 3). An important caveat is that the 63 hours she was able to accomplish in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021 with the same teacher in a community-based after school program, although incredibly valuable, were not always as course-aligned as usual. For example, the typical field-based practice opportunities for the course taken in the spring of 2021 related to intensive intervention in literacy; however, most of the practice-based learning opportunities for her that semester centered on supporting social, emotional and behavioral learning. She was able to attend a weekly planning session with her cooperating teacher each week which was also a valuable experience and is included in the documented hours. This TC has one more semester to complete, and thankfully 60 hours of practicum in the fall of 2021 prior to student teaching (see Table 4). As described, both the quality and quantity of practice-based opportunities at the practicum, or methods, level were significantly impacted by the pandemic over the course of three semesters.

Table 3: ***Example of One Student's Practice-Based Learning Opportunities***

Semester	Course	Planned Hours	Implemented Hours
Spring 2020	1	30	19 (In Person)
Fall 2020	2	30	0
Fall 2020	3	30	25 (Virtual)
Spring 2021	4	30	38 (Virtual)
Spring 2021	5	30	0
Total	-	150	80

Note: Course=sequence of special education content courses in program.

Table 4: *Practice-Based Learning Opportunities Remailing Prior to Student Teaching*

Semester	Course	Planned Hours	Implemented Hours
Fall 2021	6	30	TBD
Fall 2021	7	30	TBD

Note: Course=sequence of special education content courses in program continued from course 5 in Table 3.

The researchers were, however, able to address the challenges of limited options for Level 2 and Level 3 clinical experiences in a select number of practicum courses by thinking outside of the traditional clinical experience box. The traditional school day, and thus traditional clinical practice, runs roughly 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.; however, practice-based opportunities exist outside of these normal business hours through community-based programs such as the YMCA. In one of the Program's partnership districts, the YMCA runs an after-school program which supports social and emotional learning as well as the academic needs of students through evidence-based instructional

programs such as Bellxcel and Read Naturally. Faculty were fortunate to continue placing a portion of TC, albeit virtually, in this clinical placement throughout the pandemic.

The partnership with the YMCA afforded TC the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills from their coursework in an authentic context that was unavailable in traditional school-based settings due to COVID-19 restrictions, while receiving support and feedback from both clinical and college supervisors. During this clinical experience, TC participated asynchronously in the teacher training weeks to learn more about the curriculum and assessments utilized in the program. Then, once the program began, they participated virtually in weekly planning sessions with their cooperating teachers and provided instruction to whole groups of students through Google Meets as well as individuals and small groups of students through breakout room sessions.

In a field where attrition is high, such practice-based opportunities, are critically important as program completers are more likely to be effective and to stay in the profession if their preparation experiences are connected to authentic classroom practice (Benedict et al., 2016). Partnering with a non-traditional clinical community-based program such as the YMCA allowed the Department to continue to offer some TC practice-based opportunities at the practicum level; however, technical issues were a challenge and practice-based opportunities often stayed from course content (i.e., lessons focusing on social-emotional topics vs. literacy intervention).

Observation Level

The entry level to clinical experiences often occurs in the form of observations. Traditionally, foundational courses offer TC this experience rather than departmental courses. At this level, TC learn to be discerning observers of students, teachers, classrooms, and practices in schools and other educational settings. They become increasingly skilled at using specific protocols and take meaningful field notes. They demonstrate improvement in their ability to analyze and interpret their notes during discussions and in written reflections. They learn and abide by the policies and regulations of the school in which they are placed (FSEHD, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Level 2 and Level 3 clinical experiences tended to morph into this Level 1 clinical experience through the use of video analysis and mock data sets in lieu of authentic experiences in the field.

Reflecting on this reality, and with one semester of coursework remaining prior to student teaching for TC whose admission into the program coincided with the onset of a global pandemic, one wonders to what extent limited practice-based opportunities will affect their ability to meet the realistic demands of today's classrooms. The scope and sequence of clinical experiences across four levels provides for coherent, sequenced, and scaffolded practice-based opportunities which "allow novices to develop skill fluency and decision-making abilities prior to entering settings in which mistakes can be costly" and "can help teacher candidates automatize their knowledge and skill for teaching prior to entering complex classroom setting" (Benedict et al., 2016, p. 6). The pandemic disrupted this progression.

Considerations for the Future

Impacted TC will require additional supports as they transition from TC to novice educator to professional. As noted by Benedict et al. (2016),

> Candidates need a seamless experience from preservice to inservice that is strategic, where knowledge and skills are gradually developed and internalized, and where candidates employ metacognitive strategies to continually reflect upon their experiences and grow in their practice. Practice-based experiences matter; they provide candidates time to apply content pedagogy, to gain real experience, to understand school relationships—and, most importantly—to work with students within a supervised context. (p. 6)

Acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on clinical experiences, how do the authors start addressing this issue for the next wave of Program completers? Teacher preparation programs should begin to prepare to support these soon-to-be Program completers now by starting to work collaboratively with their state department of education and partnership districts in the development or refinement of high-quality mentoring/induction programs (Holdheide, 2020; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and professional communities of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This is complex work which will take time if the goal is to move beyond the "narrow vision" of supporting new teachers through their first year teaching towards a "new paradigm of professional development" which offers new teachers "sustained and substantive learning opportunities" over the course of their initial years in the field (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). TC who have experienced three or more semesters of disrupted clinical practice in the era of a global pandemic will require high-quality mentoring/induction programs coupled with professional communities of practice. How can College faculty ensure that this becomes a reality for them? Reflecting on the *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* (CEC, 2017) in light of limited/adapted practice-based learning opportunities as a result of the pandemic is one suggested starting point. Below, the Department's Top 10 anticipated additional supports are highlighted:

1. Establish a Supportive Learning Environment
2. Classroom Management
3. Conduct Functional Behavioral Assessments
4. Utilize Multiple Sources of Information to Develop a Comprehensive Understanding of a Student's Learning Profile
5. Systematically Design Instruction Toward Specific Learning Goals
6. Provide Intensive Intervention
7. Engage in Data-Driven Decision Making
8. Interpret and Communicate Assessment Data to Key Stakeholders, including Students
9. Collaborate with Professionals and Families to Support Student Outcomes
10. Organize and Facilitate Effective Meetings

Furthermore, the teaching field will be forever changed by this pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, the use of virtual learning days were not widespread. After living and growing through the pandemic, school districts have begun utilizing virtual school days on teacher professional development days and inclement weather days; thus eliminating make-up days for missed days of school. That said, virtual learning in the P-12 environment will remain, therefore, in addition to educating TC on traditional teaching practices, institutes of higher education will be charged with the added responsibility of teaching inclusivity through virtual only, face-to-face only, and hybrid teaching environments.

Implications & Recommendations for Research and Practice

It is difficult to know the ultimate implications of a pandemic that is still affecting the United States and the world. When will all school districts return to full face-to-face learning? How much skill regression will students have? How might attrition of any new to the field teachers be impacted? What will be the impact on teacher attrition, burn out and hiring? It will also be critical for the field to explore and understand the extent of the impact of the pandemic on both P-12 students, as well as, students in higher education as it relates to their academic progress, social/emotional health and other factors. In addition to this *Special Issue*, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research should be conducted to meet this end.

Surveys of students, families, educators, and administrators will be indicative of the aforementioned issues. Moreover, surveys can also be used to determine what positive changes to the field evolved from the pandemic and required use of virtual learning. Investigations could include:

- identifying discrepancies in equitable access to internet and technology in the home;
- determining the overall impact of virtual learning on students with exceptionalities as well as capitalizing on opportunities that virtual classroom environments might offer these students;
- exploring which virtual platforms can be used on an ongoing basis not only for the return of face-to-face learning, and how these platforms can be used when there are events that prohibit students from attending school (e.g., snowstorm, medical fragility, etc.);
- providing connectivity between students who must learn at home and their classrooms, teachers; &
- peers examining how virtual learning can provide opportunities for both flexible teaching and learning.

How can higher education institutions collaborate with partnership districts and other key stakeholders to address the realities of "unfinished learning" for both the Program's TC and P-12 learners and their families? In years to come, faculty are likely to experience both anticipated and unanticipated issues related to teacher preparation and meeting the needs of students with disabilities during a global pandemic. What issues should/will dominate the collective agenda in the short-term? What issues must/should be tackled in the long-term? Who will be a part of this collaboration? Who will set the agenda? What will the action items be? Who will be responsible for what? How will faculty hold each other accountable? How will successes be celebrated? These are important questions, but what are the questions of other key stakeholders such as the impacted TC?

When planning for professional collaboration, Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) made the case that embracing a framework of *collaborative professionalism* will lead to "a deeper and more rigorous form of collaboration" resulting in the creation of "stronger and better professional practice together" (p. 4). In defining collaborative professionalism, they wrote it is "organized in an evidence-informed...way through rigorous planning, deep and sometimes demanding dialogue, candid feedback, and continuous collaborative inquiry" (p. 4-5) and adheres to ten tenets: (a) collective autonomy, (b) collective efficacy, (c) collaborative inquiry, (d) collective responsibility, (e) collective initiative, (f) mutual dialogue, (g) joint work, (h) common meaning and purpose, (i)

collaborating with students, and (j) big-picture thinking for all (p. 6-8). For the researchers, embracing collaborative professionalism might entail creating a Professional Learning Network among faculty, impacted TC, and clinical supervisors beginning late summer or early fall and continuing for the remaining three semesters of their teacher preparation program where faculty address some of the questions and concerns raised in this self-reflection as well as those in the hearts and minds of TC. This will allow all to engage in "the joint work of collaborative professionalism….where educators actively care for and have solidarity with each other as fellow professionals as they pursue their challenging work together" (p. 5), expressing "solidarity in the face of adversity" and embracing "collective as well as individual autonomy based on shared expertise" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. 139).

As learned over the course of the last year, *we are all in this together*, but collective success depends on individual contributions. Whatever issues need to be tackle in the future (i.e., compensatory education, flexible instructional platforms, tutoring, summer school, planning preparing for future disruptions, etc.), the global pandemic has reaffirmed that the authors can do it if it is done together.

Summary & Conclusion

While historically teaching a diverse student body, often with first generation college students, the pandemic challenged faculty to better understand the needs of the Program's TC as they prepare for the realistic demands of today's diverse classrooms. Despite COVID-era disruptions and barriers, it is essential that school districts support the participation of students with disabilities in meaningful education that ensures FAPE is implemented within the LRE and facilitates the active participation of families in the decision-making processes related to their children's education. Moreover, TC need to appreciate federal and state policies that address these concerns. The authors are aware of this and have made conscientious adjustments to teaching practices during the pandemic to help ensure that TC continue to be exposed to and participate in deep conversations surrounding issues of equity and inequity as it relates to FAPE and LRE regardless of any barriers experienced such as access to technology and/or connectivity for P-12 learners and their families.

Once COVID-19 is reduced to safely accepted transmission levels, the College will revert to more comfortable and traditional status as a face-to-face institution. But changes have occurred. While prior to 2020 online coursework, off-campus options and other student friendly services were offered, the Program will now offer a broader range of courses with face-to-face, online, and hybrid versions. The Program is now better prepared to meet the needs of a diverse student body which may enrich new initiatives such as creating pathways for nontraditional students (i.e., teaching assistants) to pursue teacher certification and retaining newly certified teachers in the field of SPED.

Ultimately, many lessons were learned about teaching and advising exclusively online. Just as important the authors affirmed that flexibility, empathy, and hope remain key during uncertain times. They learned to embrace and were forced to become somewhat comfortable with ongoing change. As noted by Fullan (2007):

> The litmus of all leadership is whether it mobilizes people's commitment to putting their energy into actions designed to improve things. It is individual commitment,

> but it is also collective mobilization…short-lived if it is not based on or does not lead to a deep sense of internal purpose among organizational members. (p. 9)

Such internal commitment is not generated by external mandates in which objectives, goals, and steps are outlined by someone else and passed along. Rather, internal commitment is generated by internal purpose. Here, the authors' internal purpose was to continue to effectively serve their TC, and serve them well, despite the pandemic. These lessons have had a positive impact on the field in that educators had to rethink their teaching, implement new strategies for reaching all learners, and expand their own understanding of learning in a new environment. Something relayed over and over through conversations with professionals in the field and families as well as students and amongst faculty was that teachers in the field from early childhood through higher education were never trained to teach during a global pandemic. Slow changes in teaching practices have been made over the history of formalized education, but this pandemic fast forwarded the slow progress and demanded immediate attention. While all lessons learned were not comfortable, many will have forever changed the face of education as we know it. In the end, this pandemic has actually made the Department stronger and better situated to address other disruptions in the future.

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