

# An Introduction to the New Normal

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## ***Abstract***

*The overarching goal of this special issue was to draw upon experts in the field of special education and begin addressing the vast void in the literature related to teaching and learning during the new normal. This article serves as an introduction to the six articles within the Special Issue entitled, Special Education: Inclusive Pedagogy & Online Learning in the Era of the New Normal.*

**Keywords:** *Special Education, Covid-19, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act*

The theme for this special issue focuses on contemporary K-12-to-postsecondary Special Education Inclusive Pedagogy & Online Learning. The scope draws from a robust field of researchers and educational professionals representing various disability classifications including but not limited to learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, Deaf and hard of hearing, and physical disabilities. Given the current state of education, the articles will serve as an initial step to help fill the significant void in the literature and provide strategies on how to engage students with disabilities in an era of the *new normal*.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) 14% (7.1 million) of all public school students received special education (SPED) services under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004) during the 2018-2019 academic school year and 19% of undergraduates reported having a disability during the 2015-2016 academic school year. Given we are living in an era of the *new normal* has presented many challenges for K-12 general and special educators and postsecondary faculty as they transitioned face-to-face content to 100% online. Never before in our Nation's history have in-service educators and faculty members faced the challenge of delivering content in such an expedient and divergent method of instruction. Although this conundrum was disruptive to all students, it exacerbated issues of access, equity, and inclusion for students with disabilities.

In antiquity, technology integration has been incorporated across all educational sectors (see Fitzpatrick, 2010). However, within the last 15-to-20 years there has been an increased focus on incorporating assistive and instructional technologies for students with disabilities in both the general and SPED classroom (Arnett et al., 2021; Brown & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Dyal et al., 2009; Fitzpatrick & Theoharis, 2010). Nevertheless, employing inclusive pedagogy and online learning strategies (e.g., accommodations & modifications) while simultaneously ensuring academic rigor, maintaining high expectations, and meeting the needs of all learners became extremely difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Unfortunately, despite the need, there is a dearth of current articles regarding research-based and/or educational best practices for students with disabilities who are isolated, yet, were expected to access the general education curriculum without appropriate supports in an online environment. Given the significant disruption to face-to-face instruction, the articles within this special volume offer an overview of issues and trends associated with providing SPED services in online settings. The following section is a truncated analysis of IDEIA (2004) and serves as a foundation for understanding the federal mandate.

### **IDEIA Guidelines**

IDEIA (2004) outlined the obligations and responsibilities educators have to provide students with disabilities. These include but are not limited to meeting the six principles and four stated outcomes of IDEIA (Turnbull et. al, 2020) while simultaneously preparing students with disabilities for success beyond the classroom and school setting (Arnet et. al, 2020).

IDEIA (2004) included parameters for time accessing the general education curriculum and related services for students with disabilities. The general education is associated with how often students with disabilities are interacting with their nondisabled peers (e.g., classroom, cafeteria, playground, etc.) whereas ancillary services include but are not limited to medical procedures; transportation; counseling; physical, occupational, and/or speech therapy; and environmental considerations (e.g., air conditioning, lighting, etc.).

Although tracking the number of minutes served is fairly easy to document, online instruction posed several significant challenges when providing support services online. For example, teachers experienced difficulties when directly interfacing with students to help ensure access to the general education and ancillary services were commensurate with the goals and objectives (i.e., benchmarks) in the student's IEP. Additionally, assessing the quality of instruction and active vs. passive engagement became extremely cumbersome to monitor.

### **Article Overview**

The breadth and depth of articles throughout this special volume cover topics including (a) discussion boards, (b) teacher preparation, (c) familial perspectives, (d) virtual manipulatives, (e) tele-assessment, and (d) inclusive pedagogy. Below provides a high-level overview of each article.

#### **Discussion Boards**

The use of discussion boards in both K-12 and postsecondary settings is integral to the online teaching and learning process. Discussion boards provide students a sense of belonging to a community, engaging in content, and learning from their peers. Yount and Neild's (2022) research revealed students achieve better outcomes when using online discussion boards.

#### **Teacher Preparation**

Teacher preparation programs serve an important role in training educators how to be effective in the classroom and school setting. Although many postsecondary institutions had made the strategic decision to offer programs online, prior to the pandemic, Covid-19 negatively impacted virtually all aspects related to students teaching placements, practicums, observation hours,

and other completion requirements. Additionally, this placed students whose preferred learning style was best suited on a traditional brick-&-mortar campus in a precarious position because they were automatically removed from the face-to-face classroom. McBride Pinheiro et. al's (2022) article focused on how one program responded to providing rigorous online courses, clinical placements, advising, and other supports for their undergraduate and graduate students.

## **Familial Perspectives**

Families were perhaps the most significantly impacted by Covid-19 stay in place restrictions. Most homes across the country transitioned from a primary dwelling to a multifunction space (i.e., office, classroom, gym, etc.). Further, cultural and linguistic plurality, access to technologies, and other issues associated with *parents as teachers* were given little-to-no consideration. Neild and Crecelius' (2022) focused on employing an universal design for learning framework to help address needs and ensure the entire family had access to all required information. Whereas Lambert and Fitzpatrick (2022) conducted a quasi-qualitative study focused on parental perspectives of how SPED services were provided to their children from the onset of the pandemic-to-present.

## **Assessment**

Assessment is critical to teaching students with and without disabilities. Theoretically, teachers should be assessing students on a day-to-day basis within the classroom and school setting (Fitzpatrick, 2010). Both formal and informal assessments are integral to help ensure IEP goals and objectives (i.e., benchmarks) are met. Moreover, assessing students throughout the SPED referral and identification process is typically conducted systematically based on Federal and State mandates. These highly structured individualized protocols are often time intensive to thoroughly administer. However, with the shift to online instruction, especially within the K-12 environment, curriculum based assessments and the SPED identification process became increasingly difficult to manage. Although individualized assessment was not necessarily an issue, the complexity of administering the battery of protocols (i.e., IQ test, curriculum based assessments, etc.) became increasingly cumbersome. Dale et. al's article (2022) addressed the critical complexities of methods to administer standardized tests in virtual learning environments.

## **Instruction**

Providing appropriate accommodations and modifications is often challenging in the traditional face-to-face classroom. Translating these strategies into an online environment was extremely daunting, even for the most adept teachers. Dueker's (2022) article provides an analysis of effective virtual tools for mathematics instructions that focus on engaging students with disabilities while providing additional supports required for them to learn the material.

## **Summary & Conclusion**

This article served as a foundational overview of the Special Issue focused on the significant disruption Covid-19 had across K-to-postsecondary institutions. The Special Issue recognizes the difficulties students, families, educators, and ancillary service providers encountered during

the pandemic. The articles within are categorized into five themes which included (a) Discussion Boards, (b) Teacher Preparation, (c) Familial Perspectives, (d) Assessment, and (e) Instruction.

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