

The Impact of COVID-19:
Special Education Student Teachers' Practicum Experience during the Spring of 2020

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Cristina Umana-Rojas

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIEREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Kristen McMaster

June 2022

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge and thank Dr. Kristen McMaster, my advisor, who supported me since the beginning of this doctoral journey. She was always patient, understanding, and willing to meet with me any time I needed her support. I am extremely grateful to Dr. Jennifer McComas for giving me the best opportunity of my life when she let me be part of her grant. Jennifer changed my life by opening the door to a dream I thought impossible. I also want to thank Dr. Lori Helman for taking time out of her retirement to provide valuable feedback on my study, and for agreeing to be part of my prospectus and dissertation committees. Likewise, I want to thank Dr. Amy Kunkel for her support and willingness to be part of my committees. Every time I asked, Amy agreed to help me without hesitation. I also want to thank the department support staff, who were always very helpful. I especially want to thank Alicia Vegell and Lori Boucher. Finally, I want to acknowledge my family for believing that I could do this and encouraging me to persevere.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my three men: my husband Victorio and my sons Pedro and Etienne. Their faith in me and their constant encouragement were the forces that kept me going through this long journey.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on special education student teachers while they were doing the practicum. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyze interviews of 11 special education teachers who completed their practicum experience in the spring of 2020, when the schools transitioned from in-person to online instruction. The generated conceptual framework, *Learning to Teach During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, provides a systematic model for analyzing and interpreting the data. The conceptual framework, its themes and categories are discussed. Future research should study the effects of the pandemic on the professional preparation and personal impact of special education student teachers to better address their needs.

Keywords: practicum, special education student teachers, pandemic, COVID-19

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Dedication	ii
Abstract	iii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures	x
Definition of Key Terms.....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic Worldwide Reaction.....	3
COVID-19 in the United States	5
Changing Learning Models.....	6
Online Learning	7
COVID-19 and Teacher Education at the College Level	8
Student Teachers' Roles	9
Student Teachers in Special Education Practicums	11
Research Questions	13

Chapter 2: Literature Review	14
Method.....	14
Literature Review	15
Teacher Practicum Pre-pandemic	16
Other Student Teachers during COVID-19	21
Special Education Student Teachers during COVID-19	24
College Students' Mental Health during COVID-19.....	31
Teachers Teaching During COVID-19.....	35
Summary of Literature Review.....	43
Chapter 3: Methods	46
Design.....	46
Constructivist Grounded theory.....	46
Participants.....	47
Researcher as Participant	48
Procedures.....	49
Measures	49

Data Collection	51
Data Analysis	53
Initial Coding	54
Focused Coding	56
Themes	57
Memoing	58
Validation.....	59
Chapter 4: Results	62
Initial and Focused Coding	62
Theme 1: “Putting All The Pieces Together”	64
“Like Test-Driving Teaching”	67
My Practicum Experience.....	71
Theme 2: “Nobody Knew What The Right Thing To Do Was”.....	99
Lost Opportunities	100
Due Process and IEPs	103
Offering Suggestions	106

Theme 3: “It Felt Like We Were Really Supported”	111
Support at the University Level	112
Support at the School	114
Sharing with Classmates	119
Theme 4: Working in the Field.....	122
Reflecting on the First Year as Special Education Teachers	123
Feeling Confident.....	126
Lacking Confidence	129
Chapter 5: Discussion	134
Question 1: For Special Education Teachers Who Completed their Student Teaching in Spring of 2020, What Were their Perceptions about their Experience During the COVID- 19 Related Online Teaching Practicum?.....	134
Question 2: What Challenges did They Face During their First Year as Licensed Teachers?.....	139
Question 3: What Aspects of Online Education Do They Recommend Being Implemented Into the Teaching Practicum Post COVID-19 Pandemic?.....	141
Explanation of the Conceptual Framework	143

Validation of the Conceptual Framework.....	149
Member Checking and Peer Debriefing Feedback	151
Limitations and Further Research.....	153
Implications of the Study	155
Conclusion	159
References.....	163
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview	172
Appendix B: Examples of Memos	177

List of Tables

Table 1: Example of Initial Coding	55
Table 2: Example of Focused Coding.....	56
Table 3: Example of Categories and Theme	58
Table 4: Categories and Themes	63

List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework	144
--------------------------------------	-----

Definition of Key Terms

Distance learning - “The teaching and learning processes are mediated by the use of technology in a remote scenario” (Carrillo & Flores, 2020, p. 468). For this paper, distance learning and online learning are synonymous.

Online learning or online instruction- This educational process, which is part of the new generation of distance education (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), allows students of all ages to receive education, regardless of their physical location. For this paper, distance learning and online learning/online instruction are synonymous.

Practicum - It is the period in which future teachers practice their teaching skills in the “real world” of schools and classrooms, when the student teachers, or teachers-in-training, demonstrate “classroom readiness” (Moyo, 2020, p. 537). The goal of the practicum is for the students to have opportunities to interact with students, under supervision, while developing their own teaching style and identity (Durham et al., 2019).

Host teachers - Schoolteachers who act as school-based mentors by having student teachers teaching in their classrooms; they provide “guidance, supervision, and assessment” (Stover et al., 2019, p. 14).

Special education student teachers - College students who are ‘teachers in training,’ that is, who are completing their special education professional practicum (Gonzalez-Calvo, et al., 2020).

University faculty - For this study, university faculty refers to those instructors who are in charge of the student teachers during their professional practicum. These instructors help students bridge the gap between theory and practice (Busher et al., 2020), and will be, ultimately, the “arbiters in determining satisfactory performance in the curriculum” (Moyo, 2020, p. 538).

Chapter 1: Introduction

A major component of most education programs at the college level is the professional practicum, or student teaching, usually done during the last semester of studies (Kidd & Murray, 2020). It is during this practicum that student teachers “conceptually see, identify, and evaluate themselves as teachers” (Çelik et al., 2020). The professional practicum is a dynamic learning process that includes several elements interacting to help the student teachers in the development of their professional identities. Both the university faculty supervising the practicum and the school mentors, or host teachers, assigned to the student teachers at their designated school site form an important support system for the student teachers. While the host teachers guide the student teachers through the practical world of education, the university faculty helps the student teachers integrate that practical world with the educational theory (Kidd & Murray, 2020), and navigate the list of requirements needed to demonstrate their satisfactory performance in the practicum (Moyo, 2020).

Special education student teachers doing their professional practicum during the spring semester of 2020 saw their experience changed abruptly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lambert & Schuck, 2021). Because COVID-19 is an airborne virus, schools were forced to close their doors and move to distance/online teaching (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Special education student teachers went from a traditional professional practicum, where hands-on activities and face-to-face instruction were the norm, to a completely different experience in which distance/online learning became the new norm (Gyimah,

2020; Kim, 2020). Because of this change in the delivery of instruction, the special education student teachers experienced a series of challenges that changed the quality of their experience. Indeed, special education student teachers were forced to learn, in record time, how to impart instruction to their assigned students using different technological platforms (Kim, 2020). They also had to learn a new way to communicate with their host teachers and the school community in general, including students' families (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020). In addition, special education student teachers had to learn how to communicate virtually with their university faculty and classmates. Certainly, student teachers and those who comprised their support system had to rethink the way they did things (Kidd & Murray, 2020).

The unprecedented reality the world is still living in, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, will have ramifications for years to come. The worldwide abrupt decision to close schools and move to distance/online education was an entirely new situation that researchers need to analyze. In the fall of 2021, even though the new school year started with mostly face-to-face teaching, some of the schools around the country had to return to online teaching and/or hybrid learning (part online instruction, part in-person instruction) due to new virus variants (Reilly, 2021). A year later, in the summer of 2022, even though millions of people around the world have been vaccinated to prevent COVID-19, the world is still experiencing new variants of the virus, making possible the increase of cases, which in turn would affect our daily lives, including the education sector (World Health Organization, 2022).

By analyzing the special education student teachers' experiences during their online professional practicum in the spring of 2020, one can gain insights into how these students perceived their professional practicum. The implications of this study are two-fold. First, it recorded the experiences of this particular group of special education student teachers who became teachers during an unusual historical context. Their experiences can shed light on the possible professional areas affected by the unconventional practicum these student teachers had due to the pandemic. This knowledge might help school districts plan their professional development programs in the future. Second, based on their experiences, it might also be possible for universities to improve the education professional practicum by incorporating practices of online teaching that proved beneficial for students. This knowledge would be extremely valuable in the event of a new period of online only or hybrid instruction (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic Worldwide Reaction

During the first semester of 2020, the world experienced an unprecedented pandemic, COVID-19 (Gonzalez-Calvo et al, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). Even though the COVID-19 epidemic was originally detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, it was not until the end of January 2020 that the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency, and days later the then-president of the United States, Donald Trump, declared a public health emergency in the country (AJMC, 2021). At that time, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) began screening passengers at the

three major international airports that were the main points of entry from Wuhan to the United States (AJMC, 2021).

Because the coronavirus causes a respiratory illness that can spread between people who are in close contact, governments around the world started implementing urgent regulations for gatherings of people (Moyo, 2020). These regulations affected all facets of life. Families were unable to meet socially, sick people were isolated as much as possible, non-essential businesses were mandated to close, and schools all over the world were abruptly closed for face-to-face instruction (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Moyo, 2020). Students of all ages, from pre-kindergarten to college, found themselves in a completely novel situation: they needed to continue their education without being in a classroom (Gonzalez-Calvo et al, 2020). By April of 2020, 192 countries had mandated school closures, in an attempt to control the spread of the virus, leaving close to 1.58 billion learners uncertain of their academic progress (UNESCO, 2020). A year later, in April 2021, there were still twenty-seven countries affected with school closures, and around 174 million students who were unable to return to their classrooms (UNESCO, 2021).

Due to the characteristics of this coronavirus, there was a radical change in the way teachers taught. Students of all levels had to adapt to a new way of instruction that, even though it was not entirely unknown to them, had never been exclusive: online education (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). In a matter of weeks, online education became the norm all over the world (Gyimah, 2020; Kim, 2020). “The move online, and the blurring of the private and public, brought to the fore the significance of the technology in

enabling continuation of student learning” (Kidd & Murray, 2020, p. 548), creating anxiety and stress in the process.

COVID-19 in the United States

In the United States, the spread of the coronavirus also affected the way schools operated. Beginning in late February 2020, some school districts, concentrated in Washington State and New York, temporarily closed their schools for a few days. By the beginning of May, schools from 48 states, four U.S. territories, the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity were ordered or recommended to close for the rest of the 2019-20 school year, affecting more than 50 million public school students (Education Week, 2020).

On March 13, 2020, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz declared a state of emergency, limiting the size of social gatherings but maintaining the schools open (Howatt, 2020). However, three days later, Governor Walz ordered the closing of the state’s schools starting on March 18 to March 27, which was later extended to March 30 (Bierschbach, 2020a). The order also asked school administrators and teachers to be prepared to keep teaching in the event that the schools’ closing went longer than planned. On March 30, schools’ closures were extended until May 4 or longer if needed for the safety and health of the students and schools’ staff. During this time, schools were ordered to provide distance learning to their students (Executive Order 20-19). On April 23, 2020, Governor Walz ordered the schools to stay closed for the rest of the school year as the spread of the coronavirus kept growing (Bierschbach, 2020b). The University of

Minnesota also suspended face-to-face classes until April 1 (Bierschbach, 2020a), and eventually closed for the rest of the school year.

For the 2020-2021 school year, Governor Walz implemented the Safe Learning Plan (Executive Order 20-82) in July 2020. Following this plan, schools, districts, and charter schools were able to implement the response that best suited their communities. Because the emphasis was on safe learning, the plan required all schools to give the option of distance learning to the students' families, regardless of the learning model the schools implemented.

Changing Learning Models

The change from face-to-face to distance teaching and learning was a challenge in many countries due to their technological capabilities, as they lacked the skills and equipment to provide distance education in an effective manner (Gyimah, 2020). Teachers and students had to change environments--from a classroom at their school to their screens at home--in record time (Trust et al., 2020). Teachers had to learn how to educate their students using technology that was new or relatively new for most of them (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Online platforms such as Zoom, Google Classrooms, and WhatsApp, became the new learning environments ("A new virtual," 2021; Nel & Marais, 2020; Roth et al., 2020; Weir et al., 2020). Teachers relied on parents, who may or may not have been willing or available to support their children's education (Kim, 2020; McDevitt & Mello, 2022; Sullivan et al, 2020). Providing lessons through

videoconferencing became the most common teaching strategy used during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gyimah, 2020).

Going from a traditional classroom set-up to video-conferencing all day long was a major impact for both students and teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Roth et al., 2020). School districts and school administrators provided teachers with much needed ongoing professional development (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Sayman & Cornell, 2021), but the change was so drastic and immediate that many teachers felt they were not teaching to their best of their abilities (Kim & Asbury, Lambert & Schuck, 2021).

Online Learning

As mentioned, online instruction was the most used type of instruction happening across the globe during most of the first part of 2020. Even though some teachers used printed material to reach their students, many teachers relied mostly on online instruction (Henriksen et al., 2020). The priority, at that time, was to offer daily instruction to the students; however, it was difficult to define how the students were reacting to it, since not all the schools were monitoring their progress (Hodges et al., 2020; Trust et al., 2020).

“Online learning is an educational process which takes place over the Internet” (Kim, 2020, p. 147). This educational process, which is part of the new generation of distance education (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), allows students of all ages to receive education, regardless of their physical location. One of the advantages of online instruction is that it can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous learning occurs

when both the teacher and the students are connected online simultaneously, interacting by video or audio conferencing. Synchronous learning permits students to see and/or hear their teachers and classmates live, which simulates the interactions that occur during in-person learning, in which students share their observations and teachers provide immediate feedback (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). Asynchronous learning occurs when teachers upload their lessons and materials to the internet and students access them at times of their own choosing (Kim, 2020). Depending on the type of platform that teachers use, they may be able to share didactic materials in both synchronous and asynchronous learning modes. Teachers used both types during the COVID-19 crisis.

In the United States, online learning has developed tremendously during the last 20 years. As Bates (2001) predicted, the online capabilities of educational centers have been developed in such a way that today students of all ages can access a myriad of resources whenever and wherever they are. At the higher education level, the online learning model has been used mostly to enhance or complement and support lectures, meetings, and face-to-face tutorials (Guri-Rosenblit 2005). In fact, even though universities could conduct their courses exclusively online, most students enjoy attending the physical campus and meeting their peers and prefer face-to-face interactions with both educators and classmates (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005).

COVID-19 and Teacher Education at the College Level

The changes and challenges in the education sector affected all levels, from preschool to college. As explained earlier, due to the social restrictions implemented

because of the coronavirus pandemic, higher learning institutions also closed their doors, and online learning went from being a complement of the traditional instruction model to being the only teaching model (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Lederer et al., 2021). College educators and students had to learn how, in a matter of days, to use the online platforms, to produce materials appropriate for these platforms, to develop their pedagogy in this new environment, and to find emotional support from peers (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim, 2020; Trust et al., 2020).

Student Teachers' Roles

The ultimate purpose of any college education program is to prepare students to qualify as 'highly qualified teachers' (Zientek, 2007), and a final and crucial part of these programs is the teaching practicum. The goal of the teaching practicum is to help student teachers examine theory and practice in order to bridge the gap between these two components (Busher et al., 2020). According to Moyo (2020), the teaching practicum is an indispensable component of the teacher education curriculum, since this practicum allows the student teachers to learn from their host teachers by example, and to demonstrate classroom readiness in an actual classroom (Flores, 2016). Student teachers must try to create positive learning experiences by adapting their pedagogical knowledge to these contexts, that is, to the 'real world' of schools and classrooms (Moyo, 2020). While doing this, student teachers reflect on their values, needs, experiences, and skills that ultimately inform their teacher identity (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students were removed from their traditional work environments. Teaching practicums, which sometimes are thought as ‘rites of passage’ (Moyo, 2020) had to be completed in a new and unconventional way. Even though online education can be easily adjusted to instruction of older students (i.e., high school and college students), it presents a challenge when working with younger students, for whom direct experiences, hands-on activities and personal interaction are key elements for their learning (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Therefore, student teachers had to find new ways to interact with their students (Kim, 2020). Student teachers also had to find novel ways to interact with colleagues and parents, since these relationships are important elements, not only for job satisfaction and professional identity (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Moyo, 2020), but also for effectively performing their jobs as educators (Schuck & Lambert, 2020) .

Student teachers at the University of Minnesota were also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The university, through their education faculty, the Office of Teacher Education (OTE), and the college leadership departments, supported its student teachers and school partners (“A new virtual,” 2021). Since the practicum was entirely online, both student teachers and their assigned school partners had to be flexible in what student teaching meant. For example, the OTE consulted with the state’s Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) about ways to ensure that the university’s methods of teaching remained strong and relevant amid the pandemic’s challenges. An important change was the waivers that the state board provided on the number of hours for student teaching (“A new virtual,” 2021).

University faculty also modified their courses to facilitate their student teachers' practicum experience. For example, assignment deadlines and class participation points were waived; consistent one-on-one and/or group meetings were scheduled; course contents were synthesized, and their presentations were modified for online learning; and online resources were created for student teachers, their host teachers, and school principals ("A new virtual," 2021). These online resources provided foundational ideas on online teaching, tips for building relationships with students, parents, and school communities, and activities for assessments ("A new virtual," 2021).

Despite this list of positive changes, university faculty were aware that some elements were difficult to replicate virtually. For example, working virtually with elementary students and students with special needs inhibits the building of a strong relationship (Lambert & Schuck, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2020). Likewise, small children need hands-on activities and close contact with peers and teachers (Kim, 2020; Lambert & Schuck, 2021). In these circumstances, differentiation is harder to achieve. Indeed, it is easier for teachers to assess the level of engagement and understanding during face-to-face lessons, which facilitates the appropriate differentiation and the continuous open communication between student and teacher, promoting strong relationships (Petretto et al., 2021).

Student Teachers in Special Education Practicums

Special education student teachers doing their professional practicum balance three different roles. They act as teachers in charge of a new group of primary or high

school students, as mentees and colleagues of a new group of educators from the assigned school sites, and as students receiving instruction and guidance from university faculty (Kim, 2020; Moyo, 2020; Stover et al., 2020). Like many other student teachers around the country, the University of Minnesota student teachers doing their practicum in special education during March-June of 2020 had to balance these distinct roles with mostly unknown technological tools and a short time to learn how to use them. The repercussions of these challenges may affect those student teachers during their first years as licensed special education teachers (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). The special education professional practicum was supposed to help student teachers to understand the working of schools and classrooms, to develop classroom management techniques and lesson planning skills, and to reflect on what it means to be a special education teacher (Busher et al., 2015). Whether these expectations were achieved is one of the topics of this study.

Some articles from around the world discuss different strategies and modifications that university faculty implemented for student teachers during their practicum in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Ersin et al., 2020; Mahmud et al., 2020; Paulsen & Schmidt-Crawford, 2017). Yet, few empirical studies address the experiences of special education student teachers during this period (McDevitt & Mello, 2022; Sayman & Cornell, 2022; Weir et al., 2020).

Because the information about the student teachers' experiences during the COVID-related change of instruction is so limited, many issues need to be uncovered. It

is important to learn what kind of instruction the special education student teachers were able to provide their students using the online format during the first semester of the school closures. It is also relevant to learn from the special education student teachers their perspectives about how their experiences affected their professional development as licensed teachers, and possible features of online instruction that could be implemented permanently to the teaching practicum experience.

Research Questions

The overarching research questions for this study are:

1. What are the student teachers' perceptions about their experiences during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum?
2. What were the challenges the then special education student teachers had to face during their first year as licensed teachers, due to the changes in their practicum?
3. What aspects of online education do the special education student teachers recommend to be implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?

In summary, the aims of this study are to learn how a group of special education student teachers experienced their student teaching practicum in the spring of 2020, how their experience affected their professional performance during their first year as a licensed teacher, and what online features they recommend being implemented to improve future student teacher practicums.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I sought research articles about special education student teachers who completed their teaching practicum during the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a global menace. I was particularly interested in finding about the special education student teachers' experiences and perceptions of the changes that occurred during that period, especially during the transition from in-person to online instruction.

Method

To locate articles for this review, I searched two databases, Google Scholar and Libraries OneSearch (which includes Education Full Text, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Linguistics & Language, and PsycINFO). I also searched for citations listed in relevant articles.

To locate relevant articles, I combined the terms *special education student teacher*, *student teacher*, *preservice teacher*, *practicum*, *college students' mental health*, and *COVID-19 pandemic*. I included only peer-reviewed articles. For this study, I included articles focused on the experiences of student teachers during the pandemic, either from special education or from other areas, and articles about the mental health of US college students. I excluded articles focused on the effects of the pandemic on the practicum from the perspective of university staff. The search yielded seven relevant articles. I decided to add three more articles concerning licensed special education

teachers' perceptions related to the pandemic to compare them with the student teachers' reactions. I also included two literature reviews about the student practicum that were written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as points of comparison.

Literature Review

Because the pandemic is a recent (and ongoing) phenomenon, few studies have been published regarding student teachers' experiences of their practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this literature review, I included three studies that are directly related to special education student teachers, which is the topic of this dissertation (McDevitt & Mello, 2022; Sayman & Cornell, 2021; Weir et al., 2020). Two studies are related to the practicum experience of student teachers of different areas; one article is related to the practicum of student teachers of physical education (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020), and the second article concerns student teachers of preschool music (Kim, 2020). I included these two articles to broaden this literature review by comparing similarities and differences among the experiences of student teachers of different areas. I also included two literature reviews (Cohen et al., 2013; Lawson et al., 2015) as points of reference about the practicum experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the student teachers' perceptions about their practicum experience during COVID include not only their professional development but also their mental health, I decided to include two articles about mental health of college students during this period (Hoyt et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Lastly, I included three articles concerning special education teachers'

perceptions related to the pandemic to compare them with the student teachers' perceptions (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Lambert & Schuck, 2020; Schuck & Lambert, 2020).

Teacher Practicum Pre-pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, two groups of researchers, one from Israel (Cohen et al., 2013) and the other from the United Kingdom and Turkey (Lawson et al., 2015) published systematic reviews of empirical studies about the teaching practicum. Even though these reviews were written pre-pandemic, they are included here since they can provide a reliable idea about elements of the student teaching practicum during 'normal' times. The authors reviewed more than 100 studies, which made their findings diverse and extensive; their main purpose was to present a summary of the findings. Shared findings in both studies pertain to the importance of the practicum as a tool for the learning process of the student teachers, the importance of the relationships between mentor-mentee and school-university for the student teachers' professional development, the impact of the practicum in the closing of the gap between theory and practice, and the practicum's importance in the development of the student teachers' professional abilities and identity.

Cohen et al. (2013) wrote a systematic review that aimed at finding (1) the reasons, goals, and rationale for the implementation of the practicum, (2) its elements (activities), and (3) its effects or benefits. The researchers based their data analysis on 113 relevant studies, most of them with qualitative, naturalistic, and case study

approaches. The tools most frequently used in these studies' data were materials produced by the student teachers and individual interviews.

These researchers described the teaching practicum as “the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession experienced by prospective teachers (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 345), who train under the supervision of a host teacher and supervisors from the university. They concluded that, despite being a requirement for preservice teachers around the world, there is not enough information about the teaching practicum, its goals, values, and benefits.

In their systematic review, Cohen et al. (2013) identified four goals, each one with several sub-goals. The first goal of a practicum is to promote the student teachers' professional abilities, such as using different instructional approaches, and to promote teaching skills and efficacy in teaching. The second goal of a practicum is to strengthen the student teachers' knowledge of the school's internal and external environment, including learning to get acquainted with various cultures and to adapt teaching methods to them. The third goal is to promote the student teachers' personal growth, including the development of their cognitive skills, reasoning skills, and critical reflection. The fourth goal of a practicum is to impact the school by promoting the students' knowledge and academic achievement.

Regarding the rationale behind the teaching practicum, Cohen et al. (2013) identified four reasons. First, the practicum is regarded as a reasonable proxy of future workplaces for student teachers. Second, the practicum has the potential of reducing the

gap between theory, research, and instruction practice with the help of mentors, who closely supervise, guide, and provide feedback to the student teachers. Third, the practicum is a way for the student teachers to get acquainted to different educational settings, to diverse cultural backgrounds, and to establish relationships with the school's communities. Fourth, the practicum is the best ground to encourage and support the development of the student teachers' personal and professional identity.

In terms of the elements or activities of the practicum, Cohen et al. (2013) listed five clusters. The first cluster included mentored teaching activities, such as activities associated with planning and teaching methods. The second cluster included activities involving reflection on diverse issues, such as self-professional development, individual identity, and cultural identity. The third cluster pertained to observations focused on mentors' teaching, school's activities, family-focused, and observations by technological means. The fourth cluster included general activities of teaching; however, the article did not include specific information about the actual activities the student teachers performed while teaching. The fifth and last cluster included interactions with the school's staff, such as discussing and interviewing principals, colleagues, and community members.

Cohen et al. (2013) also noted that two crucial elements of a practicum mentioned in the data were the mentor-related and the university supervisors' activities. The first category involves activities such as observing, demonstrating, modeling, reflecting, and evaluating. The second category involved activities such as encouraging student teachers to reflect on their experiences and encouraging cooperation between the student teachers

and their mentors. Topics about the work relation of the university supervisor, the student teacher, and the mentor and the diverse sources of stress in this relation were included in several of the review's articles.

Based on the preservice teachers' opinions, Cohen et al. (2013) identified three outcomes of effects of the practicum: the student teachers' personal perceptions, beliefs, and sense of efficacy; the improvement of the student teachers' instructional competencies and skills; and the improvements in the school students' academic achievements in reading, math, and additional subjects. Favorable outcomes of student teachers' personal perceptions, beliefs and sense of efficacy included a reduction of prejudices about ethnic differences, understanding of the link between theory and practice and an increase in their knowledge of learning theories and teaching skills. Examples of improvement of student teachers' instructional competencies and skills included having student teachers and mentors work within a self-regulated learning environment, and increasingly complex classroom tasks. An example of improvement in academic achievement of students included practicums in which the student teachers focused on teaching reading comprehension and math to immigrant students.

Lawson et al. (2015) conducted a more recent literature review about the teaching practicum. This review was based on 114 studies, mostly qualitative focused and with relatively small samples. Lawson et al. (2015) researched the aims of the studies, their main participants, methodology, main outcomes, and main similarities and differences of the practicum.

Regarding the aims of the studies, the authors found several targeting various issues around the practicum, such as establishing views, perspectives, experiences, and concerns of stakeholders; evaluating the efficacy of the practicum; mentoring practices; expectations of prospective teachers; and assessing the impact of field experience. The main actors of the studies were the student teachers, school-based mentors, teacher educators and pupils, in decreasing order of attention. The main outcomes of the studies included in the review were diverse. The authors listed more than 20 outcomes. Only the most relevant outcomes pertaining to the topic of this dissertation are included here. One outcome is the importance of the relationship mentor-mentee and the communication between these agents to develop effective collaboration. A second outcome refers to the practicum as a means for the student teachers to link theory and practice. Another outcome refers to the quality rather than the duration of the practicum since a quality practicum has significant and positive effects on the student teachers' development. Another outcome refers to the importance of a good relationship and coordination between the school and the university, which improves the quality of the practicum.

Lawson et al. (2015) concluded that it was difficult to discern strong patterns in the studies since the studies were done in various countries that have diverse cultural and educational contexts and the participants may have had different perceptions of their practicum experience. Therefore, "it is difficult to see the whole picture of the practicum and to develop a rounded conceptualization of it" (Lawson, 2015, p. 12).

Other Student Teachers during COVID-19

This section includes studies about student teachers during their practicum. Unlike participants in studies in the next section, these students were not special education student teachers. Some were physical education student teachers (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020), and others were early childhood music student teachers (Kim, 2020). I decided to include these articles for two reasons: first, the articles concerning special education student teachers are very scarce; and second, the experiences of student teachers in different fields might be comparable to those in special education.

A qualitative study by Gonzalez-Calvo et al. (2020) describes eight Spaniards' physical education student teachers' practicum experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Three themes were found: loss of the in-person element during the practicum, doing a practicum outside of the classroom, and ways to cope with changes in their profession. The first theme covers the feelings of the participants about online instruction. They thought online instruction was more difficult than in-person instruction due to the excessive amount of work asked of them because their practicum at the school was replaced with academic assignments. The participants also thought their learning process was incomplete since they were not able to implement the units they developed, and thus, they could not receive feedback from their instructors. Furthermore, this lack of feedback made them feel unsure about their teaching skills. The second theme focused on the student teacher participants' feelings about the changes in their practicum. They were expecting an experience that

would deepen their professional development, since they would have been interacting and learning from the host teachers, other colleagues, students, and parents. However, this richness of the practicum experience was lost due to the pandemic, and the participants felt this would negatively affect their professional life during their first years as licensed teachers. This situation caused feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear in the participants. The third theme described how the participants dealt with the changes caused by the transition from in-person to online instruction. Due to this change, the university faculty had to adapt the practicum requirements; instead of hands-on instruction, the participants had to write several assignments. The participants received so much information and assignments that, instead of feeling calm, they felt overwhelmed, nervous, and stressed. These feelings negatively influenced their motivation toward their learning. Additionally, they felt depressed and sad because their practicum was not what they expected. The changes in the practicum left them discontented regarding their future as teachers.

Gonzalez-Calvo et al. (2020) concluded that the participants of their study felt deprived of the most important experience of their academic career, an experience that would have helped them enormously in building their identity as teachers. They expected their practicum to be an in-person, hands-on experience, and it turned out to be another course requiring many assignments. This unexpected change in the participants' expectations brought feelings of uncertainty toward the new teaching processes, depression about what they considered an incomplete practicum experience, melancholy about in-person teaching, and demotivation toward their own learning.

Kim (2020) described her experience adapting an early childhood practicum from in-person to online learning. Although Kim's emphasis was the actual modification in the practicum syllabus, she provided examples of her student teachers' experiences during the online practicum.

The adaptation of the practicum to online learning was done in three phases: planning, implementation, and reflection (Kim, 2020). During the planning phase, Kim provided instruction about online teaching, such as synchronous and asynchronous approaches. The student teachers were able to practice online teaching with their classmates. They also learned creative ways to include hands-on activities in virtual instruction. As the instructor of the music practicum, Kim recruited several pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children from around the country, who were assigned to different student teachers. During the implementation phase, each student teacher did an online class session with four students. During the reflection phase, the student teachers informally assessed the children's learning. The student teachers also watched their video-recorded sessions and wrote reflections about them.

Based on her student teachers' reflections, Kim (2020) concluded that it was crucial for them to learn in class about types of online instruction, different online platforms, and ways to include hands-on experience prior to teaching students from all over the country. Another finding was that the student teachers were able to share their visual materials and meet with their teacher or classmates virtually. They also had the

opportunity to learn from their classmates, as they all watched each other's online sessions for further feedback and reflection.

In summary, the two studies presented were written from different perspectives, and their findings are contrasting. Gonzalez-Calvo et al. (2020) focused on the participants' emotions regarding the transition to online instruction, while Kim (2020) described her findings about the changes implemented in the practicum due to the transition to online instruction. In the first article, the participants' emotions were mostly negative; they experienced stress, uncertainty, disillusionment; they felt overwhelmed by the amount of extra work; and they found online instruction to be harder than in-person instruction. In contrast, Kim (2020) found that her participants benefited from instruction about synchronous and asynchronous modes and about the adaptation of hands-on activities to virtual teaching, which made their experience during the interaction with students easier and positive. Analyzing both studies, it seems that the way in which the university professors approached the transition to online instruction produced contrasting results for their students, which in turn produced opposite emotions toward this transition.

Special Education Student Teachers during COVID-19

This section includes three published studies focused on special education student teachers' practicum during the pandemic. One article described the experiences of special education teachers when their practicum changed from a traditional experience to an individualized learning plan (Weir et al., 2020). The second article focused on graduate students doing their practicum while working as special education teachers with

emergency waivers (Sayman & Cornell, 2021). More recently, McDevitt and Mello (2022) did research on a partnership between student teachers and community settings.

Weir et al. (2020) published a qualitative study that described the experiences of special education student teachers. Their article focused on how the university faculty of a West Coast state university allowed eight special education student teachers to design their own individualized learning plans to supplement their practicum when the schools moved to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, these student teachers were working alongside their host mentors, creating lesson plans, instructing students, and establishing as part of their elementary school communities. However, when the schools closed due to the pandemic, only some of the student teachers were invited to continue their practicum, while other student teachers had their practicum terminated. Those students who were allowed to continue their practicum kept collaborating with their host teacher. Depending on their placement, their contributions varied from filming short read-aloud videos, creating worksheets, writing new social stories, or teaching a virtual mini-lesson. For those student teachers who had their practicum terminated, the university faculty decided to model individualized instruction for their students, having the student teachers design their own individualized instruction plans. These students included in their plan alternative activities, such as creating resources for families of students with disabilities, designing Pinterest boards, engaging in webinars, and learning modules, or starting a book club with other student teachers. Additionally, all the student teachers had two additional requirements: to keep a journal of their experiences and to design a unit of study. Besides the academic side of the

practicum, the university faculty had to address the stress and anxiety of the student teachers. Unfortunately, the article did not explain how it was achieved.

Weir et al. (2020) mentioned some of the benefits of the individualized instruction. For example, at the end of the practicum the students had a digital portfolio that was not part of the original requirements; students who watched webinars and learning modules acquired knowledge in a specific area of expertise they might not have learned otherwise. The authors also listed some of the changes that may be incorporated in subsequent teaching practicums. For example, a virtual journal might replace tangible notebooks or logs; video presentations may replace in person presentations; student teachers may create online resources such as read-aloud videos.

The main themes of the student teachers' reflections centered on keeping a "positive attitude in the face of challenges, continuously adjust instruction, and remain grateful" (Weir et al., 2020, p. 21). As the authors wrote, these skills are paramount for all teachers, regardless of their instructional settings.

Sayman and Cornell (2021) titled their journal article, quite appropriately, "Building the plane while trying to fly"—a phrase that clearly describes what their study's participants were doing, along with all of those involved in the education process around the globe. In their qualitative narrative inquiry study, Sayman and Cornell (2021) recounted the experiences of special education graduate students doing their practicum while working as special education teachers with emergency waivers. These 12 graduate student teachers' experiences were quite different from a typical student teacher's

experience since they were, in fact, the special education teachers on record in charge of their students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Sayman and Cornell (2021) analyzed journal entries and focus groups' transcripts. They synthesized their data into three themes. The first theme described feelings of confusion, uncertainty, and loss of control. The participants were fearful of the pandemic and its effect on themselves, their own children, and their students. They were also confused as to what their jobs' expectations were. They felt overwhelmed by the many changes in their roles as teachers because "the in-person instruction that teachers were trained to deliver had ended" (Sayman & Cornell, 2021, p.197). The second theme reported the participants' tasks during the beginning of the pandemic. They were asked to learn recent technology in record time, while trying to connect with the students. They were told that while they were learning how to navigate this new virtual scenario, academics were not the priority, engagement with the students was. However, the participants found that engagement was challenging due to a variety of reasons, such as lack of internet in their students' homes or lack of support from parents in helping the students with academic work. The participants were also overwhelmed by the additional paperwork required. In addition, they had to help colleagues and parents with technological issues. The third theme detailed how the participants dealt with the realization that their role as teachers had shifted. They felt they had lost part of their identity as teachers since "what they were doing was not what they thought it meant to be a teacher and not what they had gone to school to do" (Sayman & Cornell, 2021, p. 201). They were tired of looking at computer screens and communicating with parents and

students via phone or text. They coped by focusing on the positive aspects of their situation, such as having more time for being creative in their teaching and having more time and freedom working from home.

McDevitt and Mello (2022) also published a qualitative study regarding special education teachers doing their practicum. They did a study about family partnerships with special education student teachers in virtual practicum during the COVID-19 school closures. The goal of this study was to provide alternative field experiences for student teachers while meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with disabilities. Five student teachers who were completing their special education practicum participated in this study, along with six families who signed up through a community organization. The children were K-6 graders with documented disabilities such as autism, cerebral palsy, speech and language impairment, and ADHD. They were also emergent bilinguals. The student teachers worked with these students during the final eight weeks of the spring 2020 semester.

For this qualitative study, the student teachers provided 30-60 minutes of individualized virtual instruction two to five times a week, plus extra time communicating with the students' mothers before and after each lesson via email or phone calls or texts. The student teachers wrote biweekly self-reflections, where they described teaching activities, feelings and concerns, and questions for their instructors. The instructors provided personalized feedback during virtual meetings. When the semester was over, the authors interviewed the student teachers, mothers, and students.

Three themes emerged from the interviews and the journal entries: initial response to abrupt school closures, development of student teacher-family collaborative partnership, and successes and challenges of individualized virtual instruction.

The first theme, initial response to abrupt school closures, brought to light the challenges that the student teachers experienced when the schools closed. These challenges included feeling panic and anxiety due to the uncertainty about their practicum, lack of contact with their host teachers for some, and for those who were able to participate in virtual instruction, feelings of not learning. They were also worried about the students and their families. The second theme, development of student teacher-family collaborative partnership, covered the relationship between the student teachers and the families. The student teachers listened to the children's mothers' concerns. In turn, the mothers helped by supporting their children at home while the student teachers gave their lessons. The mothers also helped the student teachers to finish their practicum. In the third theme, successes and challenges of individualized virtual instruction, the student teachers highlighted the importance of building relationships with the students, which helped their motivation and engagement. The mothers also appreciated the individualized attention their children received and their overall development. As challenges, the student teachers mentioned their lack of knowledge regarding their students' disabilities, knowledge that they eventually acquired through trial and error and the mothers' feedback. Virtual learning was also a challenge for the student teachers. The lack of opportunities for hands-on activities forced the student teachers to step out of their comfort zone.

McDevitt and Mello (2022) concluded that the reciprocal partnership between student teachers and families provided authentic experiences for both. The student teachers were able to experience real-life application of instruction, while the mothers were able to contribute to their children's learning experiences. As implications, the authors mentioned that this type of partnership offered benefits to those involved, and digital technology provides flexible and responsive online education. The authors also highlighted the benefits of building partnerships between universities-based teacher education programs and community organizations to provide educational services through preservice teacher fieldwork (McDevitt & Mello, 2022).

To sum up, the participants of the three studies underwent major changes in their teaching experience; however, they kept a positive attitude and navigated their circumstances as best as they could. For some, their practicum was effectively canceled and they had to engage in alternative activities. For those whose practicum continued, their teaching experience was severely limited and their engagement with the students was minimal. For the participants who were both special education teachers and student teachers, the transition to online instruction felt more traumatic, since they were expecting a practicum that did not match their training for in-person instruction. In general, all the participants' initial emotions were mostly negative, such as confusion, stress, uncertainty, and loss of control; and their engagement with the students was challenging due to distinct reasons. However, they found some positive aspects in their situation, like more opportunities to be creative and the ease of working from home. For

other participants, their placement and support from the university faculty and the students' parents facilitated their practicum experience.

College Students' Mental Health during COVID-19

A recurrent theme found in the prior articles relates to the emotional impact of the pandemic on the student teachers, who were also college students (undergraduate and graduate) even though they probably did not spend a lot of time on campus during their teaching practicum semester. Studies have shown that the pandemic had negative effects on college students in general; therefore, I included in this review articles concerning college students in general to determine if their experience matches with that of the student teachers. I found three studies pertinent to this topic. In two of these studies, the authors found that college students in the United States experienced various negative effects, such as stress and anxiety, disturbances in concentration, sleeping and eating habits, social relations, and academic performance (Hoyt et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). In the third article, the authors found changes in their alcohol consumption (White et al., 2020). This last article was not included in this review since alcohol problems were not experienced by the participants of my study; therefore, this article was not relevant.

Hoyt et al. (2020) used a grounded theory approach to analyze open-ended responses of 544 young college students (18-22 years old) regarding the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on them. The study's survey also used quantitative methods to analyze socio demographic information to assess health and well-being, collecting information twice, in April and July of 2020, for two scales: the 10-item Perceived Stress

Scale (PSS) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and the Generalized Anxiety Scale (GAD-7) (Spintzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006).

For the open-ended questions, more than one-third of the participants acknowledged experiencing emotional distress due to the pandemic. One student stated that “constant stress has become the new normal” (Hoyt et al., p. 272). Students also mentioned effects on academic, financial, and social stressors. Some students described having trouble accessing technology and lacking a quiet place to study. For some women, studying from home was difficult due to the extra work they had as wives and/or mothers or sisters of young children. Other students who identified as LGBTQ+ had other stressors as well, such as losing access to mental health services and/or peer support. Students also reported financial issues, either personal or family related.

Regarding the quantitative findings, Hoyt et al. (2020) reported that, in July, women had significantly higher PSS (Cohen et al., 1983) scores and GAD-7 (Spintzer et al., 2006) scores than men, and sexual minority students reported significantly higher GAD-7 (Spintzer et al., 2006) scores than men and heterosexual students. There were no statistically significant longitudinal changes in perceived stress or anxiety symptoms by race/ethnicity or income. However, students who identified as Black and mixed ethnicity showed increased anxiety from April to July.

As conclusions, the authors noted that college students, on average, had suffered from moderate levels of anxiety and stress during the pandemic; women reported worse health well-being than men; women seemed to have increased responsibilities at home

compared to men; and sexual minority students reported having more health issues due to the loss of support from key sources. During summer, most college students experienced a decrease in stress and anxiety. Sexual minority students' levels of anxiety remained high. Similarly, Black, and multiracial students still had high stress levels in July. The authors noted that a limitation to their study is that the sample was not representative of all college students, since it was restricted to young adults, full time students.

Son et al. (2020) also did a mixed methods study about the effects of COVID on college students' mental health in the United States. These researchers analyzed the responses to a semi-structured interview, which aimed to discover how the college students coped with the effects of the pandemic. Son et al. (2020) also used the PSS (Cohen et al., 1983) to assess the participants' level of stress. Additionally, they asked the participants if their stress and anxiety had increased, decreased, or remained the same due to the pandemic. Those with increased levels of stress were asked to indicate their stress coping mechanisms.

More than half of the participants of this study ($n=195$) were female (57%) with an average age of 20.7 years, and the majority were majoring in engineering. The majority (71%) indicated that their stress had increased due to the pandemic. Among this majority, only 5% used health-counseling services. In addition, more than half indicated that they had experienced negative impacts of COVID-19 on their academic, health, and lifestyle areas. Specifically, they reported negative effects in areas such as their own or love ones' health (91%), difficulty in concentration (89%), sleeping habits (86%), social

relationships (86%), academic performance (82%), eating (70%), changes in living environment (68%), financial issues (59%), class workload (54%), and depressive (44%) or suicidal (8%) thoughts. To cope with these effects, the participants reported two mechanisms: seeking support from others and using various self-management mechanisms. Regarding seeking support, one third of the participants reported that the communication with family and friends was an important way to deal with the stress and anxiety during the pandemic. Most of the participants (70%) used self-management mechanisms such as doing relaxing hobbies, enjoying streaming services and social media, playing with pets, listening to music, reading, and drawing. Other less used mechanisms mentioned for coping with stress were ignoring the news, sleeping longer, meditation, breathing exercises, spiritual measures, keeping routines, and drinking or smoking.

This study concluded that the participants used coping mechanisms that may be adaptive or maladaptive. For example, denial and drinking as a way to disengage can increase depression, whereas acceptance and proactive behaviors can have a positive impact on mental health. With regard to academic performance, the authors noted that even though a majority of participants (82%) expressed concerns, almost half of them reported lower stress levels related to academic pressure and class workload. The authors speculated that this decrease in stress might be due to the measures that professors implemented to deal with the pandemic, such as reduced course loads, changes in requirements, and open book examinations. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the

participants in this study were engineering students; therefore, the results may not be generalized to other types of students.

In summary, it seems that student teachers experienced similar emotional changes, as did college students studying in other fields. However, the studies about student teachers only mentioned stressors related to the practicum, while the studies about college students in general included a broader list of stressors.

Teachers Teaching During COVID-19

Since one of the research questions of my study aims at learning about the participants' first year as licensed teachers, it was beneficial to find out what the existing literature had discovered about the impact of COVID-19 on teachers, so I can compare these findings with my own findings. I was interested in finding out whether the participants' reactions to the pandemic when they were student teachers were similar to the teachers' reactions. In the existing literature, there is some evidence that the reactions of student teachers were similar to those of licensed teachers. For example, Gonzalez-Calvo et al. (2020) found that the participants in their study, who were student teachers, mentioned a sense of loss and uncertainty due to their incomplete practicum experience and the impact that it would have on their professional identity. Similarly, Sayman and Cornell (2021) found that their participants experienced a sense of loss about their shifting role and the change in their identity as teachers.

In this section, three articles are included. Kim and Asbury (2020) described the impact of COVID-19 on a group of primary and secondary general education teachers in England during the first six weeks of the schools' closures. Lambert and Schuck published two qualitative studies with special education teachers. The first is a case study describing the impact of the pandemic on one special education teacher teaching math to students with disabilities (Lambert & Schuck, 2021); the second study describes how two special education teachers navigated their new virtual reality when dealing with the students and their families (Schuck & Lambert, 2020).

Kim and Asbury (2020) conducted a longitudinal interview study with 24 teachers (11 primary and 16 secondary) working in mainstream state schools. In the primary group, there were six classroom teachers and five members of Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) responsible for strategic planning and day-to-day management of the school. In the secondary group, nine members were teachers and four were SLTs members. The researchers designed a semi-structured interview, asking the participants about three key scenes in their experience of COVID-19 as teachers: a low point, a high point, and a turning point. Six themes were identified: uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, importance of relationships, teacher identity, and reflections.

The first theme, uncertainty, described the teachers' feelings of not knowing what was going on. Since the schools were closed unexpectedly, they did not have time to prepare themselves and their students. "The speed at which schools and teachers were required to enact major operational and emotional changes led to a strong emphasis on

uncertainty, represented by the prevalence of low point scenes that align with the theme” (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 10). The second theme, finding a way, described how the teachers adjusted their thinking and behavior to provide online instruction. Their teaching eventually produced positive results in the engagement of the students and their families. The STLs realized that the teachers were receiving too much paperwork and information, so they prioritized the teachers’ well-being to avoid burnout. The third theme, worry for the vulnerable, recounted how much the teachers were worried about their students and their families, especially around issues like safety, food poverty, and limited access to technology. The teachers realized that they were powerless to help their students, especially those who needed support during the school year, not only during the pandemic. The fourth theme, importance of relationships, described how much the teachers valued the relationships with their students, families, and colleagues. The abrupt break in those relationships caused sadness, distress, and concern, and it was a low point for many teachers. The fifth theme, teacher identity, centered on the effects of the pandemic on the teachers’ jobs. They found their jobs were turning into administrative jobs. Another finding was that, when interacting with students, the teachers brought their expertise to make their online sessions as productive as possible. The sixth theme, reflections, described the positive aspects of the pandemic. Despite the somewhat unclear line between work and life, the teachers appreciated having more manageable hours. They also had freedom from the national curriculum, which allowed the teachers to be creative and to differentiate in meaningful ways. They had more time for chatting or one-on-one sessions with their students. The teachers also reflected on the changes that might

be implemented into the instruction post COVID-19. Being more technological and including more holistic approaches were some of the changes.

The teachers in this study reported using different instructional approaches during the first period of the pandemic, ranging from work packets to online options including narrated PowerPoints, videos, and access to educational websites. While navigating the instruction issues, the teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by all the changes and challenges. As a coping mechanism, they sought emotional support from colleagues to share and vent with them, which in turn helped create a sense of community. Kim and Asbury (2020) concluded that, since teachers have a basic need for relatedness, the extended remote teaching experience might have implications for job satisfaction and attrition, which is a problem in England.

In the United States, a team of two researchers published two different articles about special education teachers during COVID-19. The first article is a case study of a special education teacher giving instruction in math to students with disabilities (Lambert & Schuck, 2021). In the second article, the same authors did an exploratory, qualitative study aimed at learning about two special education teachers' experiences and problems during the Spring semester of 2020 (Schuck & Lambert, 2020).

The case study (Lambert & Schuck, 2021) described the experiences of Ms. Montes, a special education teacher with more than five years of experience. She taught a 3rd-5th self-contained classroom with mostly students with IEPs for Specific Learning Disabilities and a few students with IEPs for Autism. This teacher had participated in a 4-

year long professional development course on guided instruction. Data from an individual interview was analyzed. The topics of the interview were student engagement, family engagement, and shifts in math instruction. Ms. Montes also participated in a focus group with two other colleagues, and her answers were coded with the same codes as the interview.

Four themes were generated by the data: inequitable access, socioemotional focused teaching, supporting self-regulation, and tensions in planning instruction. Regarding inequitable access, data indicated that there was a wide variation in the support the students were receiving at home. Some students engaged in online instruction without support, others needed the support of an adult, while others could not engage due to lack of support. Only one student seemed to thrive in online instruction. The socioemotional learning was the focus on Ms. Montes' instruction during her first synchronous Zoom meetings. Ms. Montes had noted that the students' socioemotional connections to each other affected her math teaching; these connections were lost during remote instruction. Regarding supporting self-regulation and independence, Ms. Montes explained that she focused on developing self-regulation. During the Zoom sessions, she realized that her students were not having opportunities to show self-regulation because of over involved parents. Ms. Montes realized the need to communicate the importance of self-regulation skills to the parents throughout the school year. In terms of tension in planning instruction, Ms. Montes struggled with the directive from the school, which was to focus on consolidating prior knowledge rather than teaching new content. She believed she needed to teach new challenging content; however, she noticed that her students were

regressing. After changing the routine and incorporating math problems with stories, she saw an improvement. Discussing next steps, Ms. Montes planned to focus on motivation, since she associated lack of motivation and engagement with difficulties in self-regulation.

Lambert and Schuck (2021) concluded that teaching special education was challenging during the COVID-19 school closures. Problems with technology, adult support, and low motivation in an online setting were issues that hindered Ms. Montes' students' learning. In addition, the authors noted that, to teach math to students with disabilities, it is necessary to consider the emotional and affective dimensions of learning.

Schuck and Lambert (2020) also did an exploratory, qualitative study focused on special education teachers' experiences during the transition to online learning in spring of 2020. Two special education teachers participated in the study. Belen taught in a 3rd-5th self-contained special education classroom while Rose taught in a 1st -2nd grade self-contained classroom. Both participants participated in a semi-structured interview. In addition, they participated in a focus interview. A thematic analysis, using an inductive approach, was utilized to analyze the data.

During this period, the participants' teaching can be classified in three stages. The first stage is related to making contact with the students and their families, which includes setting them up with technology needed to engage in online learning. While Belen and Rose were wondering about the implementation of IEP services, the parents were worried about their children's emotional states. The change in the children's

routines had negative effects on their behaviors, so Belen and Rose realized they had to establish a new routine, a new normal, before attempting to introduce content. The second stage, then, related to establishing routines at home in order to support learning. An important goal was to keep the parents comfortable. As time went on, more students and parents attended the Zoom meetings, which were structured meetings in which students did mostly games, stories, and check-ins. In the third stage, the participants transitioned to academics. At first, this transition was difficult. Around the sixth week of this period, the participants were trying to do ‘centers’ in English, math, and art, four times a week for 30 minutes. Besides content goals, they were also working on socioemotional goals, and trying to support the parents.

The participants reported the challenges they felt during this period: inequity of resources and access to technology, variation in the amount of support from home, the reliance of teachers on at-home support, different expectations from teachers and parents, regarding parents as educational partners, and limited adult support to students. The participants applied different solutions to these problems, such as making videos for students with limited adult support; offering parents one-on-one sessions to address behavioral and learning strategies and helping the families with technological issues. Another challenge was the changes in the teaching experience. The participants had to teach through a screen, which limited the interaction with teachers and peers. Limited interaction complicated instruction when working with younger students who needed modeling and encouragement to participate. Issues like grading, attendance, and accountability were difficult to manage. Holding parents accountable for schoolwork

while they were trying to cope with their own difficulties at home was not equitable. The participants felt that grading students meant, in a sense, grading the parents. An additional challenge was the shifting in work conditions. The participants felt in panic mode, trying to teach efficiently while attending several mandated virtual meetings daily. The uncertainty regarding academic progress made Belen wonder if she was doing enough for her students. Both Belen and Rose felt lonely and disconnected from their work because they were not doing their favorite parts of the job, which were being with the students and being in their own classrooms.

In conclusion, Schuck and Lambert (2020) noted that the participants' main goal during this period was to promote academic progress while supporting students' and their families' socio-emotional needs. The teachers also stated that online learning can be very demanding for parents of children with learning disabilities, particularly in stressful times, and it is important to recognize that an open communication between parents and teachers is crucial for these students.

In summary, the licensed teachers participating in these studies experienced challenges similar to those experienced by the student teachers. Feelings of uncertainty and loss, low engagement of students, learning how to instruct in a virtual setting, and adapting previous plans to new situations are common themes. It is important to remember that these were case studies; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all licensed teachers.

Summary of Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic had strong and mostly negative effects on the different stakeholders in the education process. College students and schoolteachers were highly impacted. They both experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. They both felt 'lost' because their roles had abruptly changed, and their new roles were just emerging. They relied on different coping mechanisms, the most common being reaching out to peers, professors and/or colleagues for support, sharing experiences and venting frustrations. Once the novelty of the situation wore out a little, both college students and teachers went ahead with their lives, trying to do the best they could in their respective roles. They adapted to the new circumstances and went about facing new challenges while trying to find positives in the 'new normal.'

In the reviewed studies included, special education student teachers and special education teachers had to face very particular challenges. The nature of their jobs relied on hands-on activities, modeling, encouraging, and routines. Since they had been trained to teach in person, they felt discouraged when they transitioned to online instruction. But little by little they used their teaching strategies and their creativity to adapt their teaching, so their students could receive the instruction they needed during that time, either socioemotional or academic, or both. Whether it was a read-aloud video, a virtual worksheet, a one-on-one virtual academic session, games or just meeting virtually to chat, the teachers and student teachers tried to do their best to address their students' needs.

This dissertation aimed at finding how a group of special education student teachers from a Midwestern university dealt with the challenges brought by the pandemic and the transition from in-person to online teaching. As stated earlier, the practicum is a crucial part in the student teachers' education. One of the goals of the practicum is to help the student teachers bridge the gap between the theory they learned with the practice they get during this training period (Busher et al., 2020). To bridge this gap, the student teachers rely on their host teacher's expertise and advice, so they can eventually demonstrate classroom readiness in an actual classroom (Flores, 2016; Moyo, 2020). While doing this, student teachers reflect on their values, needs, experiences, and skills that ultimately inform their teacher identity (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). With this study, I wanted to find out how this particular group of special education student teachers bridged the theory-practice gap when their learned theory did not match the practice they encountered in their actual classrooms. I was interested in finding out if the host teachers were able to mentor and advise the participants, since the host teachers' expertise was forged in a mode of instruction that had been replaced. Lastly, I was interested in the participants' reflections about the impact of the transition from in-person to online instruction in their experiences and skills, both during the practicum and during their first year as teachers.

This type of study is important because educators have experienced a pivotal transformation in the way we provide instruction, and we need to know the perceptions of those who experienced this transformation first-hand. The transition from in-person instruction to an online learning environment is likely here to stay to some extent, and the

impact of this transition on all involved is still largely unknown. We can learn how adaptable the schools, teachers, student teachers, students, and families can be by studying the experiences and perceptions of education teachers who lived through this transition. In this study, I focused on special education student teachers because the special education program usually relies heavily in in-person instruction and hands-on activities, which were very difficult or impossible to provide due to the pandemic restrictions. Therefore, the special education student teachers had to adapt, with the help of their host teachers, in order to meet the needs of their students, as well as their own needs as teachers in training. It is important to find out not only the details but also the ramifications of this adaptation in the participants' practicum and professional lives. In other words, it is important to find out how the participants lived the practicum experience and how this experience affected their professional development, thus affecting their professional lives. This information might help future teacher educators consider how the practicum experience can be modified to fulfill the new needs of the student teachers so they can become the type of special education teachers that is needed in today's world. Hopefully, as new research becomes known, stakeholders will be able to prepare better for new groups of student teachers who may have to deal, or keep dealing as new teachers, with the effects of COVID-19 on their lives and professional development.

Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to learn how a group of special education student teachers experienced their student teaching practicum in the spring of 2020, how their experience affected their professional performance during their first year as a licensed teacher, and what online features they recommend to be implemented to improve future student teacher practicums. Three research questions guided this research: (1) What are the student teachers' perceptions about their experiences during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum? (2) What were the challenges the then special education student teachers had to face during their first year as licensed teachers, due to the changes in their practicum? (3) What aspects of online education do the special education student teachers recommend to be implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?

Design

Constructivist Grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory is a structured, yet flexible methodology used when little is known about a phenomenon with the goal to produce a theory that uncovers a process inherent to the area of inquiry (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory is always inductive in its approach, that is, the understanding of the studied phenomenon emerges from and is grounded in the data (Timonen et al., 2018).

“The fundamental grounded theory question opening a study is ‘What is happening here?’ In this case, the ‘happening’ is the experience or central problem addressed in the interview.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 87). By conducting interviews to answer this particular question and research questions of the study, I strived to gather data that not only represented my participants fairly, but also that helped me construct inductive conceptual categories. By checking and refining these categories, I tried to build a ‘grounded theory,’ or an “abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 4).

Participants

The participants included special education teachers who completed their special education teaching practicum at a large public university in the Midwestern United States during the spring semester (January-May) of 2020, when the schools closed due to the pandemic and the teachers and student teachers were forced to deliver instruction online. Participants were recruited from a list of eligible candidates from the University of Minnesota Office of Teacher Education. Eleven special education teachers participated in this study, out of a group of 40 potential participants. At the time of their practicum, seven were in their final semester of their master’s program, while four were finalizing their bachelor’s program. Their degrees were in special education. For their practicum, these special education teachers, henceforth participants, were placed in different school settings throughout the metropolitan area. Six were placed at the high school level, one was placed in middle school, two at the elementary level, and one at the pre-kindergarten

level; the last participant, already hired as a teacher, was in charge of both elementary and middle school students. Only three of the participants were male. Currently, all of them work as special education teachers. Thus, as of today, they have about 20 months of experience as licensed teachers.

Researcher as Participant

In qualitative research, I am an important instrument in my research since I came up with the topic to study, developed the research questions and the questionnaire, collected the data, sorted through it, read the transcripts, and finally told the story of my research enterprise (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

As a special education teacher who worked during the spring of 2020, when the schools transitioned from in-person to online instruction, I have firsthand experiences about the phenomenon covered in my study. My experiences, beliefs and values caused preconceptions that may influence the findings of the study. Therefore, it is important to be explicit about my preconceptions in an attempt to bracket my subjectivity by “taking inventory of, and attempting to control, assumptions and preconceptions when collecting and analyzing data.” (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p. 198). My personal specific preconceptions are listed below:

-The change from in-person to online instruction that occurred in the Spring of 2020 was chaotic for all those involved in education.

-School staff dealing with the transition to online instruction were frustrated, overwhelmed, and extremely anxious about the changes.

-The support from the administrative staff was confusing and insufficient for the teachers to understand and perform their new roles and expectations.

-The mental health of the teachers suffered considerably due to the transition to online instruction and all the uncertainty and stress involved during that time.

-The academic advancement of the students at the time of the transition was not the priority of the teachers.

I tried to limit the influence of my preconceptions by looking for data that would refute these assumptions. Whenever I found categories that were similar to my preconceptions, I made sure to check the data to support the accuracy of my findings.

Procedures

Measures

Since the basic grounded theory question guiding a study is, “What is happening here?” (Glasser, 1978, as cited by Charmaz, 2014, p. 87), the interview was designed with this question in mind, which is the clarification of the events and feelings that the participants experienced during both the online portion of their professional practicum and their first year as licensed teachers. At the same time, the interview was designed to gather data to answer the main questions of this study. As recommended by Charmaz

(2014), the interview was short, and included ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions that brought an analytical edge to the data collection.

I generated the questions for the interview based on the limited literature published about this topic (i.e., Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Sayman & Cornell, 2020; Weir et al., 2020) and my own experiences working as a special education teacher during the spring of 2020. I asked two experts in teacher education to review the questionnaire. Their feedback included some style issues and one additional question, which was added to the questionnaire. It contained two sections. The first section asked about professional data to determine their placement during the teaching practicum, and their current license and placement. The second section consisted of 27 open-ended questions about their experience during their practicum and during their first year as licensed teachers. Broadly, the questionnaire included questions about the participants’ expectations, experiences, and reflections about the practicum. It also included questions about the participants’ experience as new teachers, their struggles, and their perceived strengths and weaknesses as teaching professionals.

Originally, the questionnaire had 25 questions. However, after doing the interviews with the first two participants, I realized I needed more information about their mental health and their ways of sharing experiences and venting emotions. Therefore, I added two more questions. Additionally, throughout the interviews, I asked other questions to encourage the participant to elaborate whenever a follow-up was necessary. See Appendix A for the complete questionnaire.

Data Collection

I sent two emails to potential participants, sent one week apart, to let them know about my study and to ask for their consent to participate. Along with the second email, the participants received an additional email from their former university staff letting them know that I was interested in interviewing them for my study. Two teachers contacted me after the first email and six contacted me after the second email. Through emails, the participants and I decided on a date and time to meet virtually via Zoom. Prior to the interview, I emailed each participant the consent form, and each returned it to me, signed, via email, before the interview. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted 60-90 minutes each. At the end of the interview, I asked each participant if they were willing to participate in a second shorter interview to obtain additional data about theoretical ideas being developed, if needed. All the participants responded affirmative. The participants were compensated for their contribution with a monetary gift.

After coding and analyzing the transcripts of the eight interviews, I decided to interview more participants to reach saturation. The goal of grounded theory is to reach the point where no new significant insights are emerging, which means that the collected data comprise the majority of the interactions and complexities at play (Creswell, 2014; Tinomen et al., 2018). Brantlinger et al. (2005) explained that saturation is reached when recent interviews discern the same information given by earlier responders; therefore, there is no need to interview more people. At this point, the theoretical categories are saturated with data because the researcher does not find any new properties of these

categories and the established properties account for patterns in the data collected in the interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

To recruit more participants to reach saturation, I asked my previous participants to communicate with their former classmates, letting them know about my study and my need for more participants. Since my initial contact with potential participants through their university email had produced few responses, there was a chance that they were not checking their university mail frequently and thus had not seen the information about my study, making it difficult for me to contact new potential participants. However, with the help of the participants already interviewed, I received three more emails from teachers interested in participating. I contacted them and finalized details regarding the interview. I followed the same protocol with these new three participants as before. I sent the consent form prior to the interview, which they returned signed before they were interviewed. These interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, and the participants were also compensated for their contribution.

Data preparation

The interviews were conducted online using the software Zoom. The software transcribed the data. I went over each transcription to correct errors and add words or phrases that were not caught by the software.

Timeline

For this study, the initial and focused coding stages were completed in about four weeks in a constant comparison process. This constant comparison advanced coding, categorization, and conceptualization (Timonen et al., 2018). Therefore, the first phase, initial coding, and the second phase, focused coding, are done simultaneously because I started creating categories while coding and comparing data. For the theoretical coding stage, I went back to stages one and two for further analysis to verify and reevaluate decisions about relationships and themes, and it took about three weeks. I described the coding stages in greater detail below.

Data Analysis

Following the characteristics of constructivist grounded theory summarized in Charmaz (2014), I collected and analyzed the interviews simultaneously whenever possible. I constructed analytical codes and categories from the data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses. I used memo writing to help my thinking in elaborating categories, specifying their properties, and defining their relationships.

As described by Charmaz (2014), I analyzed the collected data in two phases, although these phases overlapped. The first phase was initial coding; in this phase I focused on small segments of data (phrases) to “compare incident with incident and to look for similarities and differences in beginning patterns of data” (Chun-Tie et al., 2019, p. 4). During the second phase, the focused coding, I synthesized the initial codes into

focused codes, or categories, which are more directed, conceptual, and selective; focused coding helps determining the strength of the initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). Once I had the categories, I analyzed them to find possible relationships among them (Charmaz, 2014). This phase is referred to as theoretical coding. Theoretical coding integrates the categories and moves them into a theoretical direction by creating a coherent analytic story from the data (Charmaz, 2014). In this last step, I created four themes by relating the categories. I described this process in further detail below.

Initial Coding

Initial coding involves labeling segments of data that summarizes and categorizes each piece of data. Charmaz (2014) recommends coding the data with gerunds because using action words helps the researcher detect processes and stick to the data. When coding, I used constant comparative methods, that is, I compared statements or incidents within the same interview and compared them in different interviews to try to find patterns and contrasts. I used the NVivo software, which facilitates the process of coding, especially when the data is sizable. To code a statement, I used words to describe it as best as possible in a way that would help me remember what the statement was about. In this sense, coding is very personal because it makes sense to the researcher. In the first stages of coding, I used different wording for similar codes. For example, I used the codes “having opportunities to vent with classmates” and “venting with cohort,” which are essentially the same, but the software recorded them as two different codes. However, the more I coded, the more I was able to remember the codes I used before and used them

whenever appropriate, thus facilitating the focused coding phase. As an example, Table 1 shows two of the initial codes I made. In this case, I used different codes for the references, although both were about the same topic. The participants were talking about the expectations they had for their practicum, so eventually these particular codes became part of the category related to expectations (Table 1).

Table 1

Example of Initial Coding

Initial Code	Reference
Putting theory into practice	<p>Lucy:</p> <p>You take all these classes in college that's due process focused and that's IP focused and that's lesson planning focused and strategies focused and then it's kind of like, okay Well now, you have all the academic backgrounds, but you have to put it all together.</p>
Practicing your learning	<p>Kim:</p> <p>That is where you learn all the hands-on things, that's where you get to try out and put your things that you've learned in your undergraduate classes to the test and figure out if you're ready.</p>

Focused Coding

Focused coding requires the researcher to select, synthesize, integrate and organize large amounts of data. To do this, I studied and assessed the initial codes and thought about the ones that were promising tentative categories (Charmaz, 2014).

Focused coding is not entirely a linear process. While doing the initial coding, I started looking for patterns. For some initial codes, like the ones from the previous table, it was easier to see the pattern and create a category. For some other codes, it took me a bit longer to decide in which category they would fit better. Table 2 shows some of the initial codes I used to during focused coding to form the category *Expectations*.

Table 2

Example of Focused Coding

Initial Coding	Category
Putting theory into practice	Expectations
Learning to be a good teacher	
Learning skills for experienced teacher	
Expecting to run IEP meeting	
Expecting hands-on experience	

As shown in Table 2, and following the example in Table 1, I studied the initial codes looking for patterns and eventually found thirteen different initial codes that pertained to the participants' expectations toward the practicum. The initial codes I used helped me describe the statements from the participants in a way that made it easier for me to find patterns. In several cases, I used the word 'expecting' to differentiate the statements about expectations from other statements that mentioned related topics but in other contexts (Table 2).

Themes

After coding all the initial codes into categories, I started the process of looking for implicit relationships among the categories. Charmaz (2014) calls this process theoretical coding. At this point, I reviewed the information I had (interview transcripts, categories, and memos) to generate themes by identifying relationships among the categories. I started analyzing the potential ways in which the categories related to each other. Every time I arranged the categories in groups, I wrote a memo about the thinking behind that particular organization. In some cases, I also included a diagram, which helped me further the analysis. For this analysis, I also took into consideration the research questions of my study. After several attempts, I arranged the categories into four themes, which I explained in depth in the next chapter.

As an example and continuing with the data used for Tables 1 and 2, I noticed that the category *Expectations* was related to five other categories. I eventually renamed the category related to expectations as "*Like test-driving teaching,*" which became part of the

theme titled “*Putting all the pieces together,*” along with the other five related categories (Table 3).

Table 3

Example of Categories and Theme

Categories	Theme
“Like test-driving teaching” (Expectations) I was placed in... Teaching before COVID-19 “Teaching online was easier” Engagement issues Grading the practicum	“Putting all the pieces together”

Memoing

Through the various stages of coding, I wrote memos, which, according to Charmaz (2014), are the essence of the pivotal step between data collection and writing drafts of paper. Memos are very important in the analysis process because they are the informal analytic “pieces that build a historic audit trail to document ideas, events and the thought processes inherent in the research process” (Chun-Tie et al., 2019, p. 4). Memos are the most efficient way for the researcher to record detailed thoughts, feelings, and

intuitive reflections. Through memo writing, researchers analyze and code the data, which will lead to the development of categories and eventually a theory (Charmaz, 2004). Thus, memoing should begin at the outset of the study and continue throughout it. While going through the process of coding the data, I found myself thinking constantly about it. Whenever I had an interesting idea, or a possible relationship in the codes, or a possible explanation, I wrote it down. Memos are supposed to be personal, and therefore, they are written in ways that make sense to the writer. As Charmaz (2014) suggested, writing my memos without editing them fostered development and preserved my natural voice. In my case, my memos took many forms. For example, in a memo I wrote only three questions provoked by the data. In other, I wrote about the actual process of coding the data and its difficulties. In another, I wrote different ways to consolidate the codes into categories. As I developed more categories, I wrote possible ways to consolidate them into themes. When I felt baffled and without clear ideas, I wrote about my thoughts at the moment in order to help my thinking. On occasion, I just wrote an idea or a question that came to me, and then later, when I had thought about it, I elaborated that idea in more detail. I wrote memos on the computer, on my 'dissertation notebook,' on pieces of receipts or any other paper available if I was out of the house. I have included three of my unedited memos as examples in Appendix B.

Validation

The validation of findings in qualitative research occurs throughout the steps in the research process (Creswell, 2014). It is important to make sure that the results are

accurate from the standpoints of the researcher, the participants, and the readers. As suggested by Brantlinger et al. (2005) and Creswell (2014), the validation of findings for this study was done by implementing several approaches:

-Clarify the preconceptions – by being open and honest about the preconceptions that I, as the researcher, brings into the study, I made sure that the readers understand that the findings are shaped by the researcher's background.

-Use rich, thick description to convey the findings - by providing descriptions of behaviors and their context as interpreted by the participants, and including ample quotes, the results become more realistic, which help me build a significant analysis, adding validity to my findings.

-Member checking - this strategy refers to taking the final report back to the participants to determine whether they feel it is accurate. For the member checking, I met with three of the participants, who went over the results of the study and the conceptual framework. They provided valuable comments and suggestions, which I incorporated into the conceptual framework. I expanded on this topic in Chapter 5.

-Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account – by involving the interpretation of an unbiased person who has no personal interest in this study, I can add validity to the findings. For the peer debriefing, I asked the university professor in charge of the student teachers for feedback, which I included in the final document. I expanded on the feedback received in Chapter 5.

-Research reflection - By writing frequent memos throughout the research process, I continuously reflected about comparing data, generating categories, and establishing relationships. This constant reflection helped me uncover the meanings derived directly from the data, which in turn helped me keep my preconceptions out of the analysis (Charmaz, 2014). As I mentioned earlier, I expanded on validation further in Chapter 5 when I discussed the conceptual framework.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of special education teachers about their student teaching practicum experience during the spring semester of 2020, when the schools had to transition from in-person to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The investigation was focused on three research questions: For special education teachers who completed their student teaching in spring of 2020, (1) What were their perceptions about their experience during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum? (2) What challenges did they face during their first year as licensed teachers? (3) What aspects of online education do they recommend being implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?

In this chapter, I briefly reiterated information about the process of data analysis to introduce the rest of the chapter. Then, I explained in detail how I generated the themes of this study.

Initial and Focused Coding

I coded the data collected from the interviews by breaking it into small segments, as recommended by Charmaz (2014). Once I finished this initial coding, the data had generated more than 600 codes. I studied these codes to organize them into coherent categories. Through this second phase, I developed 15 categories (Table 4). In some cases, I used short phrases taken verbatim from the data, called “in-vivo” codes, to label some of the categories.

Table 4*Categories and Themes*

Categories	Themes
“Like test-driving teaching” I was placed in... Teaching before COVID-19 “Teaching online was easier” Engagement issues Grading the practicum	“Putting all the pieces together”
Lost opportunities Due process and IEPs Offering suggestions	‘Nobody knew what the right thing to do was’
Support at the university Support at the school Sharing experiences with classmates	“It felt like we were really supported”
Reflecting on the first year as teacher Feeling confident Lacking confidence	Working in the field

Whenever I used a verbatim phrase for a code, I used quotation marks. See Table 4 (left column) for the list of categories that I consolidated from the initial codes.

After re-reading the material (categories, actual interviews, and memos) several times, I arranged the categories, generating four themes (See right column of Table 4). These themes answered the research questions of the study. The first theme, "*Putting all the pieces together*," focused on the student teachers' expectations and actual experiences during their student teaching practicum. The second theme, "*Nobody Knew What was the Right Thing to Do*," concentrated on the participants' reflections and feelings about their practicum experience during the online instruction period. The third theme, "*It felt like we were really supported*," centered on the participants' sources of support during their practicum semester. The last theme, *Working in the field*, focused on the experiences and thoughts of the participants' first year of work as licensed special education teachers.

Theme 1: "Putting All The Pieces Together"

The first research question (What were the student teachers' perceptions about their experiences during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum?) is answered by the data in the first theme of this study: "*Putting all the pieces together*." I chose this in-vivo phrase as the title of the theme because the practicum is an indispensable component of any teacher education program, as "it is during this period that the teacher-to-be demonstrates 'classroom readiness' in the actual site of teaching and learning" (Moyo, 2020, p. 537). It is in the practicum where the students use their theoretical knowledge in a classroom, under the supervision of experienced teachers who

provide encouragement, feedback, and advice. As one participant said, in a practicum the students are “*putting all the pieces together*” in order to learn how to teach.

I generated this theme from six categories. Originally, it included seven categories. While re-reading the interviews, memos and each one of the categories, I decided that one of the categories, *Learning from my cohort*, was not part of this theme, and I explained the reasons below. Each one of the remaining six categories emphasizes distinct aspects of the practicum:

-“*Like test-driving teaching*”: This category centers on the expectations of the participants regarding their practicum. They expected to be in front of a group of students, taking charge of their instruction, doing hands-on activities, sharing with colleagues, being a part of a school community. In short, the participants expected to “*test-drive teaching*.” They talked about their desire to learn specific areas of teaching that will help them be prepared for their professional life.

-*I was placed in...*: This category summarizes the different settings where the participants work during their practicum, including the grade level and the type of placement.

-*Teaching before COVID*: This category includes what the participants shared about their experiences in their practicum before the pandemic hit, that is, during the in-person instruction period.

-“*Teaching online was easier*”: This category comprises the experiences and perceptions of the participants after the pandemic hit and the school transitioned to online instruction.

-*Engagement issues*: This category summarizes codes about the changes in students’ engagement during the online portion of the practicum, and how these changes affected the participants’ practicum experience.

-*Grading the practicum*: This category summarizes the reflections of the participants to the question “how would you grade the practicum experience and why? In this category, I gave emphasis on the reasons rather than the actual grades mentioned by the participants.

Originally, I included a category I initially labeled as *Learning from my cohort*, which incorporated codes about the college classes the participants were taking during their practicum. It also included codes about opportunities to learn and share with classmates. The codes about classes such as the size of the groups and the mode of instruction were not directly related to the teaching practicum, so they were not relevant for this study and were deleted. The codes about the opportunities to learn and share from classmates were better fit in the category *Sharing experiences with classmates*, so I incorporated those codes into that category; therefore, the category *Learning from my cohort* was deleted.

While thinking about the data for this first theme, “*Putting all the pieces together*,” I was struggling to decide the best way to present it. If I organized the data by categories, I would not be able to present a coherent picture of the specific experiences and feelings of each one of the participants, and it would be hard for the reader to keep the names of the participants, their quotes, and experiences in order. Thus, I decided to include the information of all the categories, except “*Like test-driving teaching*,” into the individual stories of the participants in one single section, which I titled *My practicum experience*. I shared the data from the category about expectations (“*Like Test-Driving Teaching*”) as a separate section. Therefore, the first theme, “*Putting all the pieces together*,” comprises two sections: “*Like test-driving teaching*” (which includes one category), and the section *My practicum experience* (which includes the other five categories). Please note that the use of ellipsis in the participants’ quotes denoted pauses in their speaking.

“*Like Test-Driving Teaching*”

Before discussing the different roles and activities that the student teachers performed during their practicum, it is important to go over their initial expectations for this experience. This final practicum has been called a ‘rite of passage’ by researchers and with good reason (Moyo, 2020). Ally, one of the participants gave a great definition for the practicum. She said the practicum should be “*like test-driving teaching*,” in other words, a hands-on experience in which the participants are expected to be active and reflective in their learning. Lucy said that she expected to use all she “had learned at

school and everything that I had done in my [previous] practicums so that I would feel confident going into my first year of teaching.” Both Kirstin and Anna used similar words to express the same expectations. Anna, a graduate student, specifically said that she was expecting to learn “all of those pieces that you don't necessarily learn in your graduate school program, so [I expect] more just on the job, really relevant training.”

The participants expected to be learning alongside experienced teachers, who were their host teachers at their respective education sites. The participants were excited because they realized that it was a unique opportunity to learn how to be a teacher in a safe environment with experts guiding and teaching them. Therefore, their expectations for this practicum experience were high. Lucy summarized their expectations clearly:

I felt like it was an opportunity to put everything that we have learned in class together and to get the opportunity to get a lot of feedback from our cooperating teachers and kind of put everything into practice and get an opportunity to start the actual teaching process and, yeah, get a lot of feedback and get a lot of experience with the actual job, rather than just sitting in the classroom.

Even though some of the participants had been teacher assistants for several years, they were aware that their role as a teacher was fundamentally different, that they would need to learn ‘teacher things.’ As Anna said, she “worked as an education assistant in my district for four years before I became a teacher, so I think [I was expecting to] just learn all the things that I didn't even know that a teacher was responsible for.”

The participants expected the practicum to be a gradual process: they would start their practicum as observers during the first weeks so they could get used to their host teachers, their teaching styles, and classrooms' routines, and work on building rapport with the students. After these introductory weeks, and based on the host teachers' guidelines, the participants would start acting as teachers. Lucy's words summarized this process:

I expected to start off with a lot less responsibility and kind of get to know my students and get to know my cooperating teacher and then to kind of gradually get more used to teaching and my students and then by the end I expected to do a lot of the teaching and get a lot of feedback and suggestions from my cooperating teacher.

One of the expectations of the participants was related to the paperwork, which is an inherent part of a special education teacher's job. Almost all the participants expressed high interest in learning about the due process procedures, in general, and the IEP process in particular. Regarding the IEP meetings, Bob specifically mentioned his priorities: "One of my big things [I wanted to learn] was how to successfully run an IEP meeting and how to effectively write IEP goals and objectives and just how to do the due process paperwork in general."

The participants were able to observe their host teacher continually during the first weeks of the practicum, but most of them were able to lead the class only occasionally during those first weeks. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and schools

transitioned from in-person to online instruction, the circumstances of their practicum changed drastically. It is no wonder that their expectations changed as well. As Jack said, things were constantly changing: “my expectations were totally changed and tampered with, and it never made anything easier because everything was always changing.”

Due to the pandemic, the participants’ host schools went from face-to-face to online instruction, which was a completely unexpected change for all the participants. Their frustration is visible in their comments because their main expectation was to function as teachers in front of a group of students for the best part of a full semester. Kim lamented, “I definitely expected to be in person the whole time! I expected to learn new things, I expected to feel kind of lost at times, and I expected to be prepared, to be a teacher after it.” As many of the participants expressed, their expectations were not fulfilled because, as the reader will learn in the last theme, *Working in the field*, they did not feel ready to be teachers after their practicum. The participants felt that, even though they graduated, they did not acquire all the skills they were supposed to learn. Ally’s words summarized their feelings about their unfulfilled expectations at the end of their experience:

I do not know. I feel like [the university faculty] kind of just wanted us to graduate which, I’m glad, I’m glad they kind of pushed it but also, I feel like we lost out on a lot of things ... like we...I feel like it was kind of just a checkmark and you completed it but really we didn’t... you know... since we went virtual,

like, were we actually really getting education on those things that we were needing to get checked off? I would not say so, no.

My Practicum Experience

The participants' practicum started as a traditional in-person experience in which the participants expected to go gradually from being an observer to being a teacher leading most of the daily routine. They saw this experience as "*putting all the pieces together*," that is, integrating knowledge acquired in college courses with hands-on experience acquired during the practicum while fulfilling their expectations. The participants of this study were doing their practicum in different levels and school sites. Of the eleven participants, six of them were at the high school level, one was at the middle school level, two were at the lower levels of elementary, and one was at a preschool facility. The last one was hired as a teacher while doing the practicum and she was in charge of students from both the elementary and middle school levels. The experiences of each participant varied depending on their grade level and federal setting. Some of them liked their practicum experience regardless of the abrupt changes; others were not too pleased with it. But all of them had to deal, one way or another, with such changes.

While reading their stories, I realized that each participants' experience was unique despite the similarities of circumstances they had to endure. Each one of them responded to the circumstances differently, depending on their individual characteristics and expectations. Some of them confronted the challenges face-to-face; they advocated

for themselves, sought opportunities, and enriched their experiences in the process. Some confronted the challenges with frustration and stress and opted to do the minimum, missing on a lot of rich opportunities. Others also confronted the challenges with frustration and stress but decided to do their best to participate and learn as much as possible, enriching their experiences regardless of setbacks. The only way to really understand what the participants went through and how they acted is to tell their stories in their own words:

Kate. One of the most distinct practicum experiences was lived by Kate. She was placed under a host teacher who, according to Kate, was burnt-out and ceased contact with Kate shortly after spring break, propelling Kate to locate a new placement to finish her practicum.

Originally, Kate was placed in a high school setting, with students who were categorized under Emotional and Behavioral Disorder and were not attending general education classes due to different circumstances. Kate was disappointed and unhappy in this setting because she did not have a good relationship with the host teacher, the students were difficult to manage, and she was uncertain of what she was doing every day and what was expected of her. She confessed that she used to cry every day during this in-person period, and it was a relief when it ended:

Truthfully, I was very happy to be done with in-person student teaching just because, like my host teacher, I didn't get along with her, you know... and I like cried every day after student teaching when I was in-person because of her,

because of the students, kind of not knowing, feeling like I didn't know what I was doing every day...so I was kind of a little happy to have a break from that.

Kate remained in this placement until after spring break, when things went unexpectedly different due to the pandemic, and she had to change placements due to a situation out of her control. In Kate's words:

So, after spring break my host teacher didn't really get back to me and [my supervisor and myself] were kind of scrambling with figuring out another placement, so I talked to a friend and I completed a different practicum with her after we got told that we were... you know, the pandemic had started ... and so, then after spring break I went into transition-age employment, and so [the students] were 18 to 21.

Kate's new setting, a transition program, was completely different from the one she had spent a little more than eight weeks. In this transition program, students who were not ready to graduate participated in a work-learning program situated in a community setting. In this program, the students took classes about independent living skills in the mornings and worked at a community setting during the afternoons. During the independent living morning class, Kate talked with her students about tasks such as how to apply for a job, how to rent an apartment, or how to cook a meal. Her job consisted in doing 30-minute online sessions with the students 2-3 times a week. Additionally, she graded assignments, recorded her notes about the sessions with the students, and met with her new host teacher. Kate was pleased about the new placement,

although she acknowledged that online instruction was challenging because it complicated communication with the students:

It was a very different way of connecting and reaching out to students, especially because of my students, they don't have the technical abilities of using Zoom or like typing, like, knowing an email address.

Although her students needed more technological assistance and more hands-on experience, Kate pointed out that “it was interesting to see how [the work program] translated online.”

When talking about her original placement, Kate stated that having gone through such an eventful practicum was hard, but it was very rewarding for her to know that she did it, and in the process, she became a better teacher: “Now that I look back on it, I feel like, because I struggled through so much through it, I became a stronger teacher, so it was just very rewarding for me to be like, ‘well I did that’.”

Jack. Jack’s experience was also atypical. He was placed at a high school, working with 9th to 12th graders in a self-contained classroom, teaching academic strategies for students who needed extra support. Before the pandemic, Jack worked with an average of 25 students who came into their classroom looking for support. He emphasized that, because their course was not part of the core courses, it was up to the students to come for support. When the pandemic hit, Jack said that the student

engagement went down to 2-3 students per day and it was at this point when his participation in the practicum decreased significantly, as he explained:

They cut our student teaching short, and I never did any online, really...I mean, I think I was offered the opportunity to, but in the capacity of the class that I was in there wasn't much online learning that was happening... I was in a room for kids that needed additional support and there just wasn't much online accessibility for that class, if that makes sense.

This affected his practicum experience, since the few students who were still seeking support were attended by his host teacher, leaving him with nothing to do. Even the teaching materials were prepared by his host teacher. Regarding the quality of instruction, Jack stated that, due to the nature of the course, learning was limited because “even when we were in person there wasn't much learning going on, just based off of the kids that were in the class and the setting.” Jack also lamented the fact that his host teacher was not a case manager, therefore, did not have to do due process, which affected Jack’s opportunity to learn aspects of this area.

In general, Jack expressed disappointment with his practicum experience. He felt he didn’t get the benefit of going through the whole experience because just when he was starting to take over the teaching the pandemic hit, and the school turned to online instruction. He ended his practicum with unfulfilled expectations. As he puts it, he wanted to learn “how to better classroom manage and how to implement materials and curriculum... I guess I had high expectations that weren't fulfilled.”

After reflecting on his experience, Jack recognized that he should have advocated more for himself, looking for ways to keep active in his practicum, despite feeling that his host teacher was underutilizing him. He concluded that he took an easier route due to personal problems he had at that time. However, looking back, he knows that taking the easier way out was not the best decision for him in the long run:

It was hard, it was hard, not knowing how to help necessarily. I mean, I'm sure I could have been more involved with my teacher and the online like services offered, but I just felt like she didn't really need me or like didn't know what to tell me to do, because this was all very new to her and new to everyone else to go there, trying to figure it out on their own and still having to, you know, be responsible for me. So, I feel like it was kind of easier for her just to like, kind of like stuck me off to the side and like at the time I was more than okay with that because I was still trying to figure out a lot of other things in my personal life so that was it was very hard and I do wish that I had been more involved, in hindsight.

Anna. Anna was another one of the participants placed with high school. Like Jess and Jack, she also experienced a frustrating practicum experience; however, unlike them, she also characterized her experience as helpful. Anna worked in a special education strategies class with 9th to 11th graders. During the in-person period of her practicum, Anna supported the students using a reading intervention curriculum. It was highly structured with very specific components per lesson.

Anna said that, when the pandemic hit, the practicum “kind of froze...so, the U didn't really want us to be super involved, or is kind of unclear what the expectation was, so it's kind of up to us if we wanted to reach out to the school.” So, she decided to reach out to her host teacher, telling her that she “was supporting if there's anything I can help with at home,” since she was not allowed in the building. Therefore, Anna took over the task of doing audio recordings of segments of the book the students were reading. They had daily worksheets they had to do independently online as well, and they could reach out to Anna for extra support if needed.

Regarding meeting with students, Anna recalled that she met with some students online one-to-one to support them in their reading. These online sessions were around 20-minutes long, which was not enough to do a full lesson from the reading curriculum, so she used to choose only one segment to work with the students. As with the other participants, Anna experienced a decline in students' engagement, since their participation was voluntary. She only worked one-on-one with two or three students every other day; therefore, her workday was considerable shorter than before online instruction:

Mostly we didn't meet, it was only if they were motivated or wanted extra help or were willing to meet one on one. There wasn't a... what's the word when you're teaching and all the students are there?... it was more of like asynchronous teaching and then, if someone was willing to work with you and...yeah...but it

was a lot, lot less, yeah, like I might have been 20 minutes a day, instead of a full school day.

When reflecting about her practicum experience, Anna felt that the pandemic “put everything on pause.” Like Kate, Anna also thought that it would have been very educational for her to be a part of the transition to online learning. Overall, her practicum experience was somewhat disappointing because “it’s frustrating to have this expectation of getting to have that hands-on learning and then not get to be a part of it.” However, it was also helpful because she learned to be flexible. She concluded that, despite all the challenges, her “time at the school was more helpful than anything I ever learned in grad school.”

Jess. Jess was another of the participants whose practicum was done in a high school with 9th-12th graders. Like Jack and Anna, Jess also had a frustrating and stressful experience during his teaching practicum. Jess and his host teacher’s plan was to allow Jess to take one class over at a time until he could teach all seven class periods. Jess initially spent several weeks observing his host teacher during the first part of the practicum. After a while, he was able to start teaching. Jess recalled that the first class he took was the one with the least behavioral issues, and right before spring break, he was already teaching two periods by himself. Up until then, things were doing fine. In fact, when asked about his most rewarding experience during that whole semester, Jess mentioned an incident that happened during the in-person portion of the practicum. He

happily shared a lengthy recollection about what he called a 'real' experience in the classroom:

So before we went to spring break and got went into distance learning, the very actually last day that I was in the classroom... so, again, I was only in the classroom, for I believe a month maybe a little less... the very last day before we went to spring break, we had been teaching governments and we built up to kind of this fun game to play at the end before spring break and it was a game in which you... essentially you have a world map and you build a government and you kind of... it's about globalization and armies and things like that, and we had a lot of engagements and I had...I'd still done a lot of observing, I hadn't done a lot of teaching, but I did some teaching. And that day, I ran, I ran the entire day because he was, my mentor was totally comfortable with me running kids, you know, being engaged in playing a video game and so that was like my one experience, where I got to teach a little bit and have fun with the scholars... that day I had engagement, the entire day, we really didn't see many behaviors because everyone was having fun and for the entire period, you know, they were playing this game, and it was awesome... so that was, that was probably my most rewarding and my one real, like, in the classroom teaching experience.

When the pandemic hit, everything went off course. According to Jess, his host teacher was spending most of his time developing asynchronous materials and new ways to teach students virtually, thus he was really stressed out and with limited time to

support Jess, So, Jess started advocating for himself, asking other staff about ways to help them. He was eager to find ways where he could utilize his skills.

During the online portion of the practicum, Jess's host teacher provided asynchronous materials to the students, while Jess provided virtual support. Jess set 'office hours' for the students to reach out. He said that these meetings were basically the only engagement he had with the students. Similar to Jack and Anna's experiences, Jess's students' engagement was low, despite using numerous methods to connect with them:

We sent emails, we sent messages via Google classroom, we sent video messages through emails they utilized, reminders to have kids try... trying to opt kids into signing in with their cell phones, so that you can send them messages via cell phone. So, we tried a lot of different ways (chuckle), but then you get behavioral high school kids that don't want to be in school and trying to get them to sit in front of a screen is very difficult.

The most challenging thing that Jess remembered about the online period of his practicum was spending a lot of time in front of his computer screen by himself, waiting for students to contact him. The lack of students' engagement frustrated him deeply:

I think the most challenging part was just, just sitting around a lot... I spent a lot of days just sitting around trying to, trying to get kids engaged to come meet with me... getting them to come and engage with you online was so difficult and I feel

like I got really frustrated just spending a lot of time by myself in my office. I think that was the most difficult part.

Reflecting on his experience, Jess felt that he lost a lot of opportunities to learn. He felt that “the experience was being taken away” from him. It was especially hard because he had had a great teaching experience right before the spring break, and he was expecting to begin teaching all the periods after the break, but of course, that didn’t happen. Instead, he spent hours in front of his computer, using his time doing schoolwork because the high school students were not engaging. He summarized his practicum experience saying that online learning was “definitely a steep learning curve and very unexpected, and I didn't get a lot of actual teaching experience.”

Kim. Kim also did her practicum at the high school level, with 9-12 graders. She described her practicum experience as stressful and unique. Kim mentioned that, during the first days of the practicum, her host teacher, who was very helpful, took time to explain her expectations clearly. This guidance helped Kim tremendously and helped her grow professionally. Thanks to this guidance, Kim was able to start teaching students early in the practicum:

The first few days [my host teacher] was like ‘this is what you're going to do,’ ‘this is how you're going to do it’ and, you know, very much directed me on how to be and how I should be in her class and then that led us to being able to eventually kind of be co-teachers and then eventually I took over.

Like Anna, Kim felt extremely stressed because, during the first weeks of online instruction, the directives from the university were confusing and contradictory at times:

Nobody really knew what was going on, or what the expectations were going to be, what our requirements were going to be, nobody knew how to teach online. For a while I wasn't really doing anything because they said, 'You don't really have to do anything,' and then they said, 'Okay, now, you do have to do something,' but then there were never really any requirements about what we were expected to do.

Kim praised her host teacher's help during the online teaching. Kim was very nervous about her future and her chances of graduating at the end of that semester. However, her host teacher figured out how to support Kim in terms of fulfilling requirements. At the same time, Kim was helping her host teacher in the technological side of things. For example, Kim set up a students' page in the software the school was using. She also spent some time helping her host teacher to learn that software. Regarding interaction with the students, Kim was able to lead some virtual group lessons that happened twice a week, but these lessons did not include the teaching of new academic content. As Kim explained:

The times that we did meet it was mostly just like a check-in, like, does anybody have any questions? So, I didn't really do a whole lot of like lessons. I did in person a little bit before we went online, but once we went online, I really wasn't doing any lessons anymore.

Besides the check-in sessions, she was also able to interact with students in written form, for example, “like typing something out and they would type something back and stuff to submit.”

Despite the decrease in interaction with the students and the stress she felt, Kim said that she had a good experience doing her practicum because she was able to participate and learn while doing both in-person and online instruction. She definitely showed signs of her optimist side when she pointed out that she did not “miss out on anything ...I just learned different stuff than wasn’t planned.”

Bob. Bob’s and Jess’s experiences were remarkably similar. Both were placed in high schools and worked with upper-grade students; both were able to work with students, although Bob was able to spend more time teaching than Jess during the in-person period; and both their roles during the pandemic were reduced to wait for students to engage virtually.

Bob worked with high school students in a self-contained classroom teaching. He described his experience as challenging, stressful, and disengaging at times. Unlike the other participants, he mentioned being particularly worried about his impact on the students’ education, especially during the online period of the practicum:

To know if you are doing it right and to know if students were getting anything out of it was very challenging and often weighed on me, knowing if I was, you know, doing the right thing or helping these kids out as they're trying to work a

computer, because all the students I work with are in special education...um, so, yeah, it was just wondering if what I'm doing was effective at all and that weighed, weighed a lot on me.

During the first two weeks of the practicum, Bob's role was to observe and build relationships with the students. Then, he took over one of the periods. After two weeks, he was able to teach two periods, and soon after, Bob was teaching all the periods but one, while his host teacher observed, guided, and supported him. Bob pointed out that his host teacher was very supportive and let him find his own style of teaching.

Because the material had been prepared by Bob's host teacher, the change to online was not as chaotic as expected. The material was put online on Google classroom, and the students worked on the assignments by themselves at their own pace. If they had questions, they could reach Bob virtually during the specified hours, or 'open office hours.' Bob described these office hours as a study hall, where students are welcome to come with questions. As most of the participants experienced, Bob did not have a lot of engagement from the students. It was difficult to connect with them. It was also difficult to be efficient doing the work virtually when the lessons were planned to be done in-person.

Due to the lack of engagement from the students, Bob had more free time than before, which was frustrating and "disengaging" on one hand, but also fulfilling on the other. Bob realized that more free time meant giving more attention to those students who did connect with him:

We set time aside for like a study hall, I guess you could say, or open office hours like you would at a college or something like that... so students... so you would be on your computer with your Zoom or your Google meet-up and your students had the link to open the video at any time they may need... so that was, I think, beneficial for a lot of students and it was... made me feel good too knowing that I was at least available and students had access to me if they needed to... I had a few students that I got to know pretty well with, and they would pop into the online office hours, and they just wanted to talk and, you know, be around another individual because they were just so bored and lonely at home, so the relationship building was kind of ... was really cool... something that you might not get to do as much in person.

Bob valued these interactions more because it was the students who were reaching out to him, wanting to communicate and build a relationship.

For Bob, his practicum experience felt brief and different, certainly not the experience he was expecting. However, the pandemic hit, and as he said, "I don't think there was anything anybody could have done to prevent that ...that's nobody's fault."

Carrie. Like Kate, Carrie had an atypical practicum experience because she had to change placements in the middle of the practicum. Carrie started the semester working with middle school students and ended up in a general education classroom with kindergarteners. At the beginning of the semester, she was placed in a resource classroom. This was a resource room for five periods, and then a co-teaching class for

two periods. During the first part of the semester, Carrie connected with the general education teachers to help them modify assignments and tests. She also supported the students with their general education work. Additionally, she assisted during some periods.

When the pandemic hit, Carrie experienced an abrupt change since the school district where she was placed did not allow anybody but licensed teachers to have contact with the students. Therefore, her chances to keep working in her practicum were severely limited to organizational tasks. She lamented this situation because she was not able to support students who were struggling with their general education work, which was the most important part of her duties as a practicum student in a special education resource classroom:

I was not allowed to meet with my students or have any contact. My only options for continuing to participate in my practicum was I could, you know, help my mentor teacher grade stuff, I could help him with paperwork with what I would be able to do, and I could like lesson plan, so, like, my only abilities within my assigned practical was like the paperwork and kind of the more office work...So I was not able to participate with my students in any way. I didn't have any chance to really work with those students and connect them with their gen ed work, support them in that way, especially in the middle school setting as a resource teacher.

Along with the ban on contacting students, Carrie experienced a break in communication with her host teacher. It seemed he was unable or unwilling to help Carrie with her practicum experience. She recalled that her university supervisor and herself made several attempts to communicate with the host teacher to solve the situation; however, they were not successful. Carrie was very gracious when talking about her host teacher. She assumed his unwillingness to help her was due to his own struggle to move from in-person to online instruction:

My cooperating teacher...ah... I mean, I could believe he was overwhelmed and also struggling, but he was really struggling to continue to meet with me and continue to meet my needs as a student. He wasn't really willing to meet... like we were trying to get some three way zoom calls with me my supervisor and then my cooperating teacher... and he was struggling to find time to meet with us, and he wasn't really persevering or trying to be understanding my need for requirements and hours, and I think he just wasn't feeling like maybe he didn't have any extra energy to give to me, since he was managing his own work as a professional... so, yeah, it was, it was a struggle.

Carrie recalled that, because she was unable to continue working with students, the university faculty asked her to work on guided modules from an educational website as part of her requirements. These modules included videos and reading material that covered different educational topics, such as behavior management or modification of curriculum. Carrie remembered that although they were lengthy modules, they were

beneficial to her education because they taught best practices instruction, which counteracted the not-so-best practices that her host mentor displayed in the classroom:

I think my mentor teacher often shared... I don't want to say not best practices, but he kind of shared like the loopholes, like, you know, I do it this way because it's quicker or something... so I think a benefit of the modules is like, especially when you're like a new up-and-coming teacher, like, you need to learn that best practices before you learn your loopholes.

Carrie advocated for herself by petitioning permission to finish her practicum with her older sister, a kindergarten teacher in another district. Her supervisor supported her, enabling Carrie to spend the last two months of her practicum co-teaching a kindergarten class. During this time, she was able to participate in both synchronous and asynchronous lessons. Specifically, she was able to write lessons, record and publish videos, post assignments online, and do group 'live meets' with the kindergarteners. In Carrie's opinion, the most meaningful type of instruction is done synchronously because it gives the teacher the opportunity to interact with the students in real time and adjust the lesson to their needs:

I think that the synchronous work is super important because I think kind of recording a lesson by yourself, you know, you don't get the same challenges as when there's actually students asking questions or there's no students participating or there's.. you know... it's just you're kind of doing it to record it.

Reflecting on her practicum, Carrie expressed that it was brief and not as systematic or helpful as she expected it would be. However, she said that it opened her eyes to the reality of education, when, regardless of your plans, things change and teachers must adapt and keep teaching, even though it may not be as structured as they expected.

Lucy. Lucy was particularly worried about the impact that the change from in-person to online instruction was going to have on her future as a special education teacher. Even though she had a good experience in her practicum, especially during the in-person period, she felt she did not have enough practice teaching and thus, did not have enough time to develop enough confidence in herself as a teacher.

Lucy was one of three participants who were placed in the lower grade levels. Specifically, Lucy worked in a K-3 self-contained classroom with two teachers. Lucy cooperated with both of them and their students, although only one of them was her host teacher. Lucy was able to observe two different teaching styles. Both cooperating teachers were very supportive of Lucy and were willing to let her try different things. At the same time, Lucy was advocating for herself and continually asked for opportunities to do as many tasks as she could:

[The teachers] were really flexible about letting me do what I needed to do and pull certain kids and run certain groups, and I really appreciate that they seem to have a lot of trust in me and wanted to support me in being as independent as possible and... yeah, they were. I appreciate that they were able to kind of let me

do what I needed to do and run my own groups and when I was ready for something and I would ask and say, 'hey can I can I run this math group or something?' they were always like, 'yeah, of course,' and then would help me with it.

Lucy had the opportunity to lead small groups; however, she did not have the opportunity to lead as a teacher a whole day during the in-person period. She recalled that the online instruction started just when she was starting to feel confident working with the students.

When the pandemic hit, her mentor teacher was expecting directives from her school district. Likewise, Lucy found herself without clear plans to follow due to the directives received from the university. She remembered vividly the day when she was informed that she was not to come to her school placement anymore. She felt extremely disappointed about the abrupt change in her routine and hurt about her inability to have closure with her students:

We were in person, one day, and then we were online the next day... and the U sent an email at like 8:00 pm on like a Wednesday and said 'you can't go in tomorrow'. So that was really hard for me to deal with, that I never got to explain to my kids why I couldn't see them again and I, you know, I developed this relationship with my kids, and I could never really, I never really saw them again.

During the online instruction, Lucy was not able to interact with the students on a

day-to-day basis. She and her mentor teacher did have synchronous time with them, but it was a once-a-week interaction, and it was mostly to check-in. While the host teacher took care of maintaining contact with the students' parents, Lucy's main task was to develop assignments and post them online daily. It was a trying time because she had to teach herself how to use the software that the school used. Because the students were younger and some of them had technology issues (i.e., did not have devices or did not know how to access the program), Lucy noticed a decline in engagement. That is why she was so excited when she realized that a few students were not only accessing her posted assignments, but also working on them. She described the surprise and satisfaction she felt about the students' response to her work with a lengthy and beautiful recollection:

I remember when I was sitting in my room by myself and I had like a read aloud that I was doing and I was just reading this book and I was like, 'these kids are not going to be able to look at this, I don't know why I'm doing this', whatever... and then I remember posting it on Seesaw and making some assignment like ...I think I read an ABC book and then I was like, okay like write out your ABC or something like that was the associated assignment, and I remember the first time that a kid did it and I was like 'oh my gosh I posted an assignment!' ... I had no idea how Seesaw worked or if my kids were connected, or if they were going to click on it, I had no idea if they even had devices or anything and I remember that being like a really rewarding experience, because I was like I put together something for my kids to do, and they did it... yeah, it worked and, was it the best thing in the entire world and now they're going to be the best students ever? No,

but it was exciting that, at least, I felt like I was doing something that was contributing to some part of their education, and it was exciting that it actually, yeah, it worked and they were able to see my video, and they were able to listen to a teacher talking about a story for at least 10 minutes and, yeah, so I remember that being a really exciting moment.

Upon reflecting about her teaching practicum, Lucy was satisfied with her experience up until the change to online practicum, when she “hadn’t necessarily a super negative experience,” but it was challenging and disappointing and did affect her confidence because she did not feel ready to start her career as a licensed teacher.

Kirstin. Kirstin described her practicum as a “jolted” experience, with a lot of uncertainty and change brought by the pandemic and the changes to the type of instruction in her school site.

Kirstin was placed at a preschool institution, in a self-contained classroom. When she started the practicum, Kirstin thought she was going to spend several weeks observing and doing what her host teacher requested before being able to lead the class. However, her host mentor, who Kirstin described as “empowering,” had other ideas, and Kirstin was able to start teaching after only four weeks into the practicum. During her first part of the practicum, Kirstin had an incredibly positive experience. Kirstin usually met at the beginning of the week with her host teacher to plan the activities for the whole week. During the week, Kirstin was allowed to lead the class while the host teacher stepped back and offered guidance and support.

Kirstin recalled that, when the pandemic hit, she was not allowed to go back into the school, even though the teachers were still meeting. Like other participants, she recalled receiving unclear information from the university faculty that left her and her host teacher very confused as to what to do. As she remembered it, the university faculty “said that we had to not be a part of it at all, like we had to resign... like they said, like you're just done with your student teaching, that my practicum was done effective immediately.” Thus, her host teacher “took back the classroom.” Days later, the university faculty sent new directives stating that she could continue with her practicum. By then her host teacher had control over the classroom, so Kirstin had lost the opportunity to function as the lead teacher, having to take a role as a support hand for the rest of the practicum:

So then basically what ended up happening is I just was kind of like an extra hand for her... she was totally the leader of teaching, I just like... She'd be like ‘hey can you make a video with a read-aloud?’ I'd be like ‘sure,’ or you know, ‘can you make a video,’ of whatever or ‘can you FaceTime with or zoom with this student ... so then it was like that was kind of like the rest of the time I just kind of helped her with online learning, which was super different, but it definitely was not my classroom anymore.

When the pandemic hit, Kirstin was put in charge of six students, with whom she had to connect virtually for around 25 minutes every day. These sessions were very productive because they were one-on-one, and because the parents were present helping

their children. On Fridays, Kirstin and her mentor had a virtual group session, which was hard to manage due to the students' attention issues. Despite the challenges that online instruction brought, Kirstin concluded that real learning was happening, and a particularly important factor in that learning were the students' parents:

We were learning...It wasn't great, it wasn't, you know, like as good as in-person, but we were having quality time with every student...and it was because it was one-on-one... and with the parents... their parents were sitting next to them as it was a huge big deal... [when] the parents that weren't home or weren't able to sit next to [the children], we weren't able to do the lessons because they're like kindergarten students, you know, they needed somebody to help them facilitate it, but if parents were able to facilitate, then we would do a lesson.

Kirstin lamented that she did not get "the full process," and she was unable to develop her teaching skills better. She also lamented the lost opportunities to learn the different aspects of being a special education teacher. However, she reflected that, because of this experience, she learned to adapt better to unexpected circumstances: "Life is really uncertain and, although that was like tons of uncertainty and constant change... I think that it's helped me just roll with things a little bit more..."

Ally. Ally described her practicum as a hard experience, because she had a lot of responsibilities at home and at school. However, she did her best to learn as much as she could. In fact, she described herself as a "sponge and I tried to soak up as much, like, knowledge and advice from the other people around me."

Ally was placed in a K-2 self-contained classroom with five students and two assistant teachers. Before going to online instruction, Ally had a close relationship with her host teacher. She used to include Ally in all her activities, such as staff meetings, calling parents, IEP meetings, and daily morning meetings with the classroom's assistant teachers. They even had lunch together. But after the move to online instruction things changed, and Ally lost opportunities to interact with and learn from her host teacher:

But then when we went distance, I feel like we lost a lot, like, [my host teacher] didn't keep me in the loop with everything, you know, because we're virtual or through a computer and she wasn't very tech savvy either. So, I feel like there was a lot of disconnect because she maybe necessarily didn't feel like I needed to know...I don't know, maybe not that I didn't need to know, but it was just harder, a new way of doing things.

She stated that when the schools moved to online learning, the pace and quantity of work lessened because “when we were distance learning there wasn't much for us to do at the elementary level.” On a typical day, Ally connected daily with her team, which included her host teacher and two assistant teachers. After the morning meetings, she worked on tasks assigned by the host teacher's checklist. Her tasks included connecting virtually with one or two of her students to check-in with them. These sessions were usually very short, especially because these young students were not particularly skillful using technology. For the youngest students, she had to check-in with them via short phone calls to the parents:

Honestly, it would be like a 5 to 10 minute check-in. These are... like, a kindergartener's not signing into the computer, yeah. So, the two kindergarteners that we had, we never checked in with them at all... um... I would maybe make a phone call to the parent and just ask how the, how the child's doing, if they need any resources if they were, you know if... because a lot of them were on free and reduced lunch, so we kind of just make sure they were, you know, getting fed and they have lunch, but outside of that if they were not signing in, you know, it wasn't a lot of contact with the kid at all when we were virtual.

Ally mentioned that she worked with those students who connected virtually - usually the 2nd graders- "in social skills more than academic material, such as games like 'Would you rather' or similar activities" to keep the connections with the students. This socioemotional learning was important to Ally, since she used to teach it along with her host teacher, but just before the transition to online instruction she had taken over it and was teaching it by herself.

Mel. Mel's situation was different from the rest of the participants. She was working as a full-time special education teacher while doing her practicum, so her experience was quite unique. For starters, she had to work with her students eight hours a day during both in-person and online instruction, while the other participants had different schedules, depending on the tasks assigned for the day. She was also responsible for students from elementary to middle school levels.

During her practicum semester, Mel was working with K-8th students as a

resource teacher. Her recollection of her practicum experience was not very clear, probably because she was hired as a teacher at the time and her duties did not change due to COVID-19. She did recall that, when the pandemic hit, she had completed most of her practicum, so she was asked to participate in virtual modules to complete the hours she needed:

From my practicum I finished the most, like a 70% of the practicum I finished, I completed in the physical setting, and for the rest of I just watched for like 30, probably 20%, I watched some videos, you know?

Even though during most of the online period of the semester she was not doing her practicum, she mentioned having some of the same difficulties as the rest of the participants. For example, she mentioned the challenges of teaching virtually because the students spent many hours in front of their computer screen, and it was hard for them to concentrate. However, she noticed that the students' learning improved faster if the parents helped:

The students were at home, and they had to sit there for probably hours, hours, five hours or something, but if you kept like, asking them out, like sitting there longer, you know, it was kind of hard for them... It was hard for them to pay attention, but for others, because their parents helped them, they made very good progress.

Thinking about her practicum experience, what Mel lamented most was the lost opportunity to be observed by her university supervisor, and thus, receive valuable feedback from her. Mel remembered that, during the first and only observation she had, the supervisor made a lot of observations and offered valuable suggestions for improvement, and Mel was looking forward to more observations and feedback to improve her teaching skills.

In summary, the participants reacted to many unexpected challenges in ways that revealed their resilience and adaptability, which helped them find the positive side of those challenges. For example, on one hand they complained about the students' low engagement; on the other hand, they recognized that this low engagement gave them extra time to chat and get to know the students who did connect virtually with them. They lamented not being able to be in front of a whole group, however, they were able to work more one-on-one or in small groups. The participants had to face modifications in the way they interacted with students and in their university requirements, which taught them to be flexible as teachers. In all, the participants did learn skills. As Kim optimistically reflected, "I didn't really miss out on anything... I just learned different stuff than wasn't like planned... if that makes sense."

To recapitulate, the first theme, "*Putting all the pieces together,*" recounted the expectations of the participants for their practicum, and their actual experiences during the second part of their practicum, when the schools transitioned to online instruction. Regarding their expectations, most of them wanted to develop their teaching skills with

help from their host mentor; they wanted to be able to align theory with practice; they also wanted to learn specific tasks of special education teachers, such as the due process procedures. In reality, these expectations were not completely fulfilled. During the transition to online instruction, all of the participants experienced challenges, which made the overall practicum experience somewhat frustrating and stressful. However, they learned to be flexible and to adapt, trying to make the best of their circumstances.

Theme 2: “Nobody Knew What The Right Thing To Do Was”

The second theme is composed of the participants’ reflections and perceptions about their practicum experience. They recalled feeling stressed, uncertain, frustrated, and lost because the new reality that the COVID-19 pandemic brought was completely unknown to everybody. As Kim put it, “nobody knew what the right thing to do was.”

This theme includes three categories. The first one, *Lost Opportunities*, summarizes the thoughts of the participants about the skills they did not learn or would have liked to learn during their practicum. The second category is *Due Process and IEPs (Individualized Education Plans)*. Because of the number of initial codes regarding these topics, I decided to create a category covering them. When reflecting upon their practicum experience, the participants talked in depth about these two topics and their concerns of not being fully prepared to know how to implement them. The third category, *Offering Suggestions*, is composed of the suggestions that the participants offered to improve the practicum experience of future student teachers. This last category answers the third research question (What aspects of online education do the special education

student teachers recommend to be implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?), however, I decided to place the category under Theme 2, because the suggestions offered were part of the participants' reflective process.

Lost Opportunities

When reflecting about their practicum experience, the participants talked about the skills and opportunities they lost due to the chaotic experience they had. All their comments about loss of opportunities are related to the transition from in-person to online instruction. Several pointed out that, before the transition to online instruction, they were satisfied with their practicum experience. For example, when asked to grade his practicum, Jess said that he “would give it a 5 [out of 10] because prior to distance learning, I felt like I was starting to figure things out and it was just cut off so, I'll give it a right-down-the-middle rating.”

Transitioning to online teaching was a challenge because the communication between the participants and their host teachers changed. Some students felt that, even though they had a good working relationship with their host teacher, the communication changed when they had to communicate virtually. In some cases, this change may have been not because the host teachers were not interested in mentoring, but because they lacked technological skills. For example, Ally recalls that:

When we were in person, I went and did everything that my teacher did, you know, I did just everything. But then, when we went distance, I feel like we lost a

lot, like she didn't keep me in the loop with everything, you know, because we're virtual or through a computer and she wasn't very tech savvy.

The participants mentioned several areas in which they felt they did not get enough experience. These areas included lesson planning, classroom management skills, instruction, curriculum building, and modifications to online teaching. They knew that it was important for them to understand, learn, and manage these areas with some expertise in their near future as licensed teachers; therefore, it was important for them to get experience in them during the practicum. However, due to the pandemic and the transition to online teaching, they lost that opportunity. As Carrie said:

It's just seeing like all the aspects of special ed because, like you know, there's like the lesson planning, there's the instruction, there's the paperwork, there's the IEP meetings... so I feel like I didn't really get to see a good layout of how a teacher manages all four of those things.

Most of the participants mentioned that they lacked enough experience in instruction; that is, teaching in front of a classroom. As explained in the first theme, most of them had some opportunities to teach during the in-person period of the practicum, but these opportunities were not enough for them to feel confident as teachers: “I think [I lost] the repetitiveness of stuff, you know that, like you just keep doing something over and over again, and you finally get it” (Ally).

Another area in which most of the participants felt they lost opportunities to learn was classroom management. This area is especially important for special education teachers because they deal with students with behavioral and attention issues. Jess summarized this concern when he said that:

the biggest skill that I could have... that I was lacking, especially when we came back to in person was classroom management and how to engage with the students, especially behavioral students in person, because there was a huge difference between when we were in distance learning and even when we did start, you know, having kids come into the classroom, a lot of them had their cameras turned off and just weren't there... And so having that skill set of being able to manage my classroom, manage my behaviors and also provide instruction... I missed all of that.

Regarding lesson planning, the participants complained that they were starting to plan their lessons when the pandemic hit, and online instruction did not offer the same opportunities due to diverse issues. For example, Anna explained that she was unable to teach a whole lesson of the highly structured curriculum she was using due to the short periods of online learning. Bob mentioned that it was more difficult to teach, and “to be efficient and to manage how to run everything electronically when lesson plans were supposed to be face-to-face.”

There were also issues regarding the lack of motivation of the students, which resulted in lost opportunities for engagement, since the students' engagement was low. It

was a frustrating issue because, depending on their age and abilities, some students did not have “the technical abilities of using Zoom or like typing, like knowing an email address,” so communicating with them was challenging. Other students connected virtually to the group sessions; however, they opted to have their cameras turned off, which also affected their engagement issues. Other students did not connect for various reasons, despite numerous requests from their teachers.

In sum, the spring of 2020 practicum was challenging for the participants. They lost many learning opportunities that would have helped them build confidence and start finding their own teaching style. They did not feel prepared or confident to be licensed teachers at the end of the semester. As Lucy explained:

I felt like I was kind of starting to get in my group and starting to get confident when we pulled out of in-person learning ... and then right when we pulled out, I felt like how am I ever going to feel confident going into a class teaching? I've never really had a full day of teaching independently and I was just really, really nervous that I was never going to get that experience before I was a licensed teacher.

Due Process and IEPs

These two topics were mentioned frequently by almost all the participants. When asked about missing opportunities during their practicum, the majority mentioned the

lack of experience in due process and IEP procedures, even though they did have opportunities to be present in IEP in meetings and to study IEP documents.

All of the participants had the opportunity to assist to at least one IEP meeting in-person. Only a handful were able to assist to an IEP virtual meeting. In a couple of cases, the participants were able to provide useful information about a student during the meetings, but most of them were only observers. During online instruction, most of them did not have opportunity to participate in IEP meetings because they were not invited or because this type of meeting was not happening in some schools:

I wanted to learn how to do the IEPs and the due process paperwork and all that but, for me, I lost out on all of that. I really didn't get any direction on that type of thing because it just wasn't happening with the distance learning...

Regarding the writing of an IEP, most of the participants did not have the opportunity to participate in this process, especially during the online part of the practicum, because, as Bob explained, the case managers were teaching themselves how to write these documents with the new directives given by the Department of Education:

Because like, because of all the legalities things, all the wording from the Minnesota Department of Education had to change, and so the, even the experienced teachers were learning how to, you know, do all this new verbiage, the first time, so they really couldn't tell other people how to do it so...

Another major concern of the participants was their lack of experience with the evaluation process. Most of them knew “bits and pieces” of the process, however, it was not enough to give them the confidence to go over the whole process the next year when they became licensed teachers. Carrie was one of the participants who did not have enough experience in the evaluation process:

I didn't get to see... I saw the start of an evaluation, but I didn't get to see like a whole initial evaluation, from start to finish, and I didn't really get to see much of... yeah, I didn't get to see the... all of the aspects come together.

The participants did mention that they had taken at least one course early in their careers about due process and IEP procedures. Despite this, these topics were a big concern, because they are vital parts of being a special education teacher. Carrie summarized the thoughts of her peers:

I don't think I learned a lot about the due process aspect and how it actually looks like within a school because, in my undergrad degree, you know, we had a class all about it, but it seems a lot different once you are in a school teaching full time and then you have to do your initial evaluations and your three-year evaluations and all of that stuff so I don't think I saw... I don't think I was really able to see how evaluations and due process fit in to a, like a special education teacher's workload and day.

Offering Suggestions

These suggestions are based on the participants' reflections about their lost opportunities, which is the reason I included this category here. As stated earlier, one of the research questions focused on suggestions offered by the participants to improve the student teaching practicum. Although the research question focused on online improvements, the participants went beyond and offered ideas that included university courses, host teachers, and building community.

Regarding technological issues, the participants suggested that the university might offer more courses in "being virtual," that is, learning about different technological platforms that are currently being used to teach in our schools:

I think like background in being virtual, like it'd be nice if we had, we got to sit down and learn all about Zoom, learn all about Google meets, learn all about... because I feel like we're just kind of expected to know that part (Ally).

The participants did mention they took a course that had to do with technology in the classroom. They commented that it was a great course; however, they suggested that it should be expanded on, since things have changed significantly from the time they took that class, when online instruction was not the main option to teach:

We learned about things like Flip Grid and Google classroom but, at the time, it wasn't like... it was more of like 'ahh... you will never need that,' because we weren't in a digital era. But now learning how to use Google classroom efficiently

is huge ... so I definitely think kind of putting a lot more meat and potatoes into that technology class would be really beneficial ... just because I had to learn all of that, out of my own experience. (Kate)

As a final suggestion, Anna mentioned that it would be a good idea to help the student teachers build a “tool bank of virtual resources and different options out there.”

Another suggestion given by Ally was related to what she called “online etiquette.” She referred to instances in which school personnel or classmates were too informal when participating in virtual meetings, because they were “wearing pajamas or half naked on their computer, like, that's just, I don't know, something that we never thought we'd have to teach, but I think that is something that should be taught.”

The participants also suggested offering courses in lesson planning for online instruction, including synchronous and asynchronous lessons. Bob suggested that a lesson-planning course should focus specifically on math and reading, since “those are the standards that the state of Minnesota cares about the most.” Jess emphasized the need to learn how to plan asynchronous lessons because, in his opinion, this type of instruction “did not work very well.” Therefore, he said that student teachers need to learn how to utilize different forms of technology and virtual teaching materials, so students engage better and are more motivated to learn the content:

I would say that you need to make sure that you're utilizing different forms of technology to keep kids engaged so using things like Kahoot! and using different

forms of multimedia. So maybe you find interesting articles, or you have videos or... you can't just sit in a Google Meet lecture that doesn't work very well to get engagement and discussion... We need to use different forms of technology to keep kids interested.

Another suggestion about courses has to do with a “class devoted to the IEP and a big area would be focused on goals and objectives... how to write effective goals and objectives.” Some participants remembered taking a course about special education procedures at the beginning of their study program, but they suggested that it would be more beneficial if they could take that class during the practicum or shortly before it, in order to really grasp the complexity of the due process.

Other suggestions unrelated to technological issues were mentioned. For example, the participants suggested that it would be beneficial if the university faculty clarifies with the host teachers, and if possible, the district representatives, the expectations for the student teachers so they get the maximum benefit of the practicum experience:

If the [host] teachers don't know what you're supposed to be doing, it'd be nice to have the University backing up student teachers and saying they still need to be doing stuff... Maybe like the U providing suggestions of, you know, doing a read-aloud or recording videos and posting them or something like that ... just to say you know these are their assignments that they need to be doing, these are things that they can do, and like please support them in doing this, so it'd be nice to have the U send that to the cooperating teachers, I guess.

Related to this suggestion, Jack added that it would be important for the University faculty to “make sure that there's follow-through, and there's something in place to ensure that learning is still going on from the standpoint of the student teacher.”

Another suggestion for the University faculty is to coordinate with the school districts to facilitate the participation of the student teachers in synchronous instruction because that is the most meaningful experience they need to learn how to teach. However, the participants know that this suggestion might be difficult for the university faculty to guarantee since the school districts are the ones who take the final decisions during unexpected situations:

I think the synchronous face-to-face work is what needs to be available, and I know that's, you know, districts representatives, you know, that's above the University of Minnesota capability to ensure that... but the most meaningful was definitely face-to-face work. (Carrie)

A couple of suggestions concerned the placements in high school settings. Jack suggested that the university faculty “align their student teachers more appropriately with a classroom that would be more similar to like a standard classroom.” He based this suggestion on his own practicum experience because he was placed in a resource classroom to which the students were not required to go and the host teacher was not a case manager, which of course affected his opportunities to learn.

A final suggestion is related to the need of the student teachers to find a place to share experiences and ask questions among themselves. This topic is expanded upon in a category, *Sharing experiences with classmates*, within the next theme (i.e., “*It felt like we were really supported*”). Succinctly, the participants commented that they did not have a specified time for sharing during the practicum. Some of them communicated through social media, but not all were part of the virtual group. They also talked about some college classes being too large, which made sharing difficult. Therefore, they suggested the need to create a scheduled space and time for the students to share experiences, ask questions, voice concerns, decompress, learn from one another, or just vent with their classmates or with a sympathetic professor. Anna suggested that it would be a good idea to have different spaces for undergraduates and graduates because these groups do not have the same life experience. Besides, it would be easier to connect if the groups are small:

I think it would have been nice to have a smaller community and a class just focused on us, because then I think when we did go to distance it was such a large class everyone had their screens off... there wasn't really a lot of discussion or community... I think we had a couple meetings, just as a cohort to talk about some of our final paper working things for licensure... um... so, then it felt good and it felt like we're all on the same page, but it felt really disjointed with how larger classes were... um... so I think that would be my one recommendation.

In summary, the second theme, “*Nobody knew what the right thing to do was,*” shared the participants’ reflections regarding the different areas that they were not able to develop due to the change to online instruction. They expressed feeling unprepared in areas that are essential to be effective teachers, such as lesson planning, classroom management, and instruction in general. They also expressed concerns regarding their lack of expertise in the due process and IEPs procedures. In this theme, the participants offered suggestions to improve future practicum experiences. Among others, these suggestions included more technology and online instruction classes, a stronger university-school relationship, and procedures in place to help the student teachers’ emotional wellbeing.

Theme 3: “It Felt Like We Were Really Supported”

This theme reflects the different sources of support that the participants had during their practicum. The data were organized in three categories: *Support at the University*, *Support at the school*, and *Sharing experiences with classmates*. The first category covers the opinions of the participants regarding the support that they received from the university faculty during their practicum, and especially during the online portion of it. The second category summarizes the thoughts of the participants about their host teachers and their supervisors, who provided support at the school level. The last category covers the last source of support of the participants, which is the support of their peers.

Support at the University Level

When the schools transitioned to online learning, the participants experienced mixed feelings toward the university's support. At first, they were feeling lost, uncertain, and stressed because the university was not quick in giving directives as to how to proceed. In Kim's words:

I think when, just when we first went to distance and then I didn't I didn't really know what was going on and I didn't understand the expectations ... Things were really, really, really not clear for a long time ...so that was probably the most challenging part is that I just didn't know what was expected of me ...

By that time, the participants were already banned from the schools building due to sanitary regulations; therefore, they were at home awaiting instruction on how to proceed. They recalled being told that they were "done with the practicum." The University faculty shared with the participants that "we are not requiring host teachers to continue working with you" and to "keep working on your checklist of things you can do." On top of that, the weekly meetings with the faculty to talk about requirements were rescheduled several times due to the lack of new information to share with them, since the faculty was waiting for directives from the state's Department of Education.

At this point, the students were very anxious about their timeline to fulfill the requirements of the practicum. Their focus changed from wanting a good practicum experience to being able to obtain their teaching license at the end of the semester. As

Kate stated, “when we entered online my... pretty much my only goal was just to make sure that I was going to be able to graduate still because I was really nervous about that.”

However, once things settled a little and the students knew what to expect for the rest of the semester, they relaxed. They continued their courses online without problems since “the U was pretty good at getting things set up and doing online courses.” They continued fulfilling the new list of requirements. They felt that the university faculty was taking care of their concerns regarding graduation. As Anna said, the faculty’s priority was to help them graduate:

It felt like we were really supported, like our professors were very focused on helping and making sure we got through [the practicum], and I think we probably got off easy because some of the requirements... I think they even took off our plate because of the unusual circumstances.

In sum, the participants did feel supported by the university faculty, except for a few weeks during the transition to online, when communication was sparse and unclear. The participants said that, once the university faculty received directives that they could pass on to them, the communication between them was constant and positive. They felt that the faculty was as committed as they were in keeping their practicum going all the way to graduation.

Support at the School

At the school level, the participants received support from two sources: their host teacher, with whom the participants spent the school hours, and the university supervisors, who came to observe the participants' performance in the classroom.

Kim summarized the role of the host teacher when she said that “the host teacher makes or breaks [the practicum] for every student.” For this group of participants, the host teachers did play a vital role in the quality of their practicum experience. Most of the participants said they had a good relationship with their host teacher and had warm praise for them. For Kim, her host teacher was awesome, and she had nothing but good things to say about her. Her host teacher was very committed to Kim's needs and vowed to help her as much as Kim needed:

My host teacher was so awesome that she was like ‘we're just going to get you caught back up’ ... She's like, ‘I promise you'll feel ready,’ you know, she's like ‘that's my goal I don't care how much time we have like we're just going to make it work.’

In some cases, even when the relationship between the participants and their host teachers was good, the participants had issues with them. For example, Ally called her host teacher “her main resource” although their relationship suffered due to the transition to online instruction. Ally was expecting to be a part of her host teacher's classroom

during the online period; however, she was not as responsive to Ally's needs as during the in-person period. She recalled that, during the online instruction period she:

...asked, you know, what I could do, and [my host teacher] just would say that, you know, she would let me know if anything came up and there just wasn't much to do and I don't know if that had to do with the numbers [of students] that we were getting.

Anna also had a good relationship with her host teacher, but when the transition to online instruction happened, they did not have enough opportunities to connect because the host teacher was "very busy and visibly stressed." Jack stated that his host teacher was very good but not the best placement for him because she was a resource teacher without cases assigned to her. Jess said that his host mentor was "very down to earth and very accommodating," however, they had communication issues during the online period, because his host teacher was stressed out and spent a lot of his time developing material for his students:

The biggest part that made our relationship difficult again was just everyone was kind of figuring things out and how, you know, we didn't have a lot of directions from the district at first so he tried his best to help connect with me and provide me with a lot of the things that I needed, but he was also spending most of his time developing brand new ways of teaching kids and developing, you know, curriculum on technology and all that stuff...

A few participants were more open about the difficult relationship they had with their host teacher during the online part of the practicum. For example, Carrie recalled that her host teacher was overwhelmed and “struggling to continue to meet with me and continue to meet my needs as a student.” The communication between them broke. On top of that, the school district where she was placed did not let her work virtually with the students. Both issues prompted Carrie to look for another placement to finish her practicum. Kate had a similar experience as Carrie. Kate recalled having a somewhat negative experience with her host teacher, who was not satisfied with her teaching job and was actually “looking for jobs outside of education.” When the online transition happened, Kate lost contact with her host teacher, which prompted her to look for another placement. Luckily, her experience with her second host teacher was the opposite of the first one. It helped that Kate had a personal relationship with her:

My second mentor I really love ...like I said, I had a personal relationship with her so it's really easy to kind of ask her questions and troubleshoot things and explore hypothetical and ask for, like, what would you do in a real situation like ‘how would you approach that?’ so it was great...

Other students experienced a positive shift in the relationship with their host teachers due to the challenges brought by the pandemic. For example, Kirstin commented that her host teacher was very knowledgeable and organized and was a great mentor. However, when the online instruction started, her host teacher was not as technologically savvy as Kirstin and experienced many challenges and relied on Kirstin’s help. Kirstin

said that at that time they went from a relationship of mentor-mentee to a relationship similar to that between colleagues. As Kirstin said, “we were on this equal playing field.”

Regarding the supervisors, most of the participants expressed having a good relationship with them. The participants were supposed to be observed three times, but due to the pandemic they were observed only once, except Anna, who recalled being observed twice. All the observations occurred during the in-person period.

Most of the participants remembered receiving feedback, but their reaction to it was mixed. Anna remembered that her supervisor’s feedback was useful and helped her feel validated:

We had a really good relationship, and she had to observe me at least once, maybe twice in person, and she had really good feedback, a lot of really nice things to say, and so I felt like I was doing a really great job and felt really validated by her.

Carrie also mentioned having a “super wonderful” supervisor who was a problem solver and always willing to help her make the best of the practicum experience. Others did not find the received feedback as useful. Jack remembered that he didn’t like his supervisor’s feedback, although he did not recall the reason. Jess stated that his supervisor provided good feedback, but he did not have the opportunity to put his advice in practice due to the transition to online instruction:

I got good feedback... and I, you know, I had some things that I was able to kind of think about and work on... but we went into distance learning so quickly after, that you know, kind of even forgot that, all of that.

Kim received very positive feedback; however, she was not quite satisfied with it. She thought that, because it was her first experience teaching, her supervisor should have provided deeper suggestions to promote her development as teacher:

She gave me a lot of compliments when she came to observe me... I remember thinking like 'Oh, she probably could have like critiqued me a little bit more' ... like there wasn't a lot of like you could work on this, it was just kind of a lot of positives, which is good, but I kind of wanted feedback of like what can I do better, you know, like this is my first time teaching, I obviously am not perfect, so, I remember, I remember thinking I wish I got a little bit more feedback.

Lucy was very disappointed with the feedback she received from her supervisor because it "was not helpful." Her feedback was very general, which did not help Lucy improve her teaching skills. Lucy also mentioned that whenever she emailed her supervisor with questions, she dismissed her or did not say more than "everything is good." One participant, Mel, recalled being disappointed because her supervisor was not able to observe her more than once. Mel received a lot of useful feedback from her supervisor during the first observation. She was eager to include these suggestions in her teaching and was looking forward to more visits and feedback from the supervisor and was disappointed that they did not happen due to the pandemic.

Sharing with Classmates

The participants also received support from one another. During their practicum, they were still getting together at the university, where they had group meetings with the faculty in charge of the practicum. Whenever they got together, they took the opportunity to share experiences, ask questions, and vent frustration.

Among the group of participants, seven were graduate students and four were undergraduate students. Even though they met together during several courses, they tended to meet with their own cohort because they felt that the groups were too large and communication was difficult, especially during virtual meetings. As Anna said, “when we did go to distance it was such a large class everyone had their screens off... there wasn't really a lot of discussion or community.”

The participants valued their sharing with classmates. For example, Anna said that, during the practicum, her cohort was “probably the best community I had in that time.” However, their time to talk with one another was somewhat limited. For example, during class time, the participants did not have a lot of time to share among themselves. If they were early, they met before class. On occasion, some professors gave them some time to share. Anna remembered a particular professor who used to give them “5-10 minutes at the start of a class to vent and talk and decompress... so I think that was really helpful, but not every class created that space.”

To encourage communication among classmates, the undergraduate students turned to social media. They opened a group chat, and Kim estimated that almost all of her cohort participated in it. In this group, they talked freely about their practicum, discussed challenges and frustrations, and even compared experiences. In fact, Kim said that it was through this group that she realized how different her practicum when compared with the experience of other classmates:

We have a group chat on social media so we would talk about our experiences and what was going on ... and I remember thinking wow ... my experience is pretty good compared to what's going on in these other places, and a lot of people were just like, yeah, I'm really not doing anything, I'm not, I don't know what to do, or so... yeah, we definitely vented together.

During the online portion of the practicum, communication through social media became especially important, because the participants were clustered either with housemates, family members, or by themselves. Lucy remembered frequently using “texting, FaceTime, that kind of thing, because we all pretty much left campus. [The university faculty] were kind of like ‘leave’ (chuckle) ... So I went to my parents’ house and my other friends pretty much all left campus as well.” For Kate, the support from her peers was particularly important. She said that she needed to decompress but did not know how. Her host teacher was not supporting her in that way, and she felt alone because her friends outside the university did not understand the frustration and challenges that she experienced in her practicum placement. Therefore, sharing with her

peers who had similar experiences was very comforting for her. For several of the participants, the communication with their cohort has kept active beyond the practicum.

The graduate students also found comfort sharing experiences with their cohort. Before the pandemic, they sat together during class whenever they could, but their experience was different from the experience of the undergraduates, since throughout their studies they had to work during the day and then attend classes at night, which left them scarce time to talk. Anna mentioned that she felt that there was a disconnect in the group of graduate students, because the college classes were too large, and it was difficult to communicate. She mentioned that, in a couple of occasions, they met as a cohort and their experience was a lot better because “it felt good, and it felt like we're all on the same page... but it felt really disjointed with how larger classes were [when] they were mixed in with the undergrad classes.”

Bob shared that he opened a Facebook chat, and he was in constant communication with two of his peers. They were friends since they worked as paraprofessionals at the same school, so they became close friends. This chat was open throughout the two years of graduate studies. For Bob, it was a particularly important venue that he had for venting with friends that were living a similar experience:

We were constantly interacting with each other and talking about our experience and all that stuff... so I had that, I had a, you know, I had somewhere to vent, I had somewhere to talk about assignments, I had somewhere to talk about kids...

Jess, who was one of the members of this Facebook chat, added that he also valued the communication and support from his friends. He shared that “we communicated outside of the class, we hung out outside of class... we worked on things together, so I did have that experience... I was lucky because I knew these guys.”

This theme, “*It felt like we were really supported,*” summarizes the interactions of the participants with the university professor in charge of the practicum, the university supervisor, and the host teachers. These three agents provided ample support to the participants throughout their practicum experience. The participants also received support from their peers. Although all the participants’ experiences were different, most of them described feeling supported by all the people involved.

Theme 4: Working in the Field

This theme, which answers the second research question (What were the challenges the then special education student teachers had to face during their first year as licensed teachers, due to the changes in their practicum?) describes the participants’ thoughts and feelings while being a licensed special education teacher during their first year on the job. The first category, *Reflecting on the first year as special education teachers*, summarizes their thoughts about becoming part of a school as licensed special education teachers. The second category, *Feeling Confident*, condenses their thoughts about their strengths during the first year as teachers, and the last category, *Lacking Confidence*, condenses the areas that they perceived as their weaknesses during that same year.

Reflecting on the First Year as Special Education Teachers

The participants' first year of work was a period as stressful as their practicum because they had to provide online instruction for several months, and later hybrid instruction, and they lacked the necessary experience. Some of them remembered not feeling confident in their skills as teachers; however, they realized that they had grown professionally and personally.

When reflecting about their personal growth during that first year as teachers, some of the participants realized that this growth started while doing their practicum. They talked about having learned to be flexible and to adapt. As Carrie said:

I learned how to be flexible... flexible and kind of vulnerable in the situation where I already didn't necessarily feel confident as a teacher, yet... I was, you know, in a classroom, I was uncomfortable... so online I felt even more uncomfortable, so I think being vulnerable and just be willing to try...

The participants mentioned learning to build rapport with their students regardless of their mode of instruction. They talked about developing changes in attitudes that facilitates their perspective as teachers. For example, Anna talked about having learned to maintain a better work/life balance. She realized that, as long as she provided the best education she could give, she was doing her job well since "all we can do is provide the best education we can for students, and we can't do all things for them." She talked about the importance of giving herself "grace" when dealing with challenging behaviors in

order to maintain her work/life balance. In addition, she learned the value of collaboration, and thus, learned to ask for help. She realized that her teaching and resources improved when she turned to her colleagues for help and guidance. Similarly, Ally said that, even though she is a very independent woman, she learned to ask for help.

Several of the participants talked about the joy of seeing progress in their students and knowing that they played a part in that progress, even though the journey might have been somewhat hectic:

You see some big behaviors at the start of the school year and you think to yourself how am I going to manage this classroom and, you know, get students to want to learn, but then you know, in February you look back on September, and you can see the growth in the students, their progression from where they were to where they are now ...is really cool!

Other participants reflected on the hardships that the pandemic had imposed, not only on themselves as student teachers and later as licensed teachers, but also on the students. They realized that a particularly important part of their role as teachers was to provide a safe place for their students throughout all the transitions:

So I've just seen these students, you know, struggle through transitions and changes and differences...and so I just have found that I have been a consistent person and safe place for them where they come and they can be exhausted, and

they can be mad, and they can share their frustration about this and how overwhelmed they feel about online and some of their classes in person.

The participants also talked about the importance of making connections with the students, which are hard to make during online instruction. As Carrie said:

When students are home it's hard to make a student care about school and stuff over a computer... so learning that connection is really valuable and this can be big in getting students to want to be there, want to participate, want to try.

The participants also reflected on special education as a field. They mentioned that one of the advantages of being a special education teacher is the collaboration that exists between them and other professionals, such as school psychologists and social workers. They also mentioned the work relationship between special education teachers and teacher assistants. Some expressed that it had been somewhat of a challenge to learn how to work with other adults in the classroom while being the one in charge.

Several participants talked about their first-year mentors, who were instrumental in facilitating their transition from student teachers to licensed teachers. They remembered having a good and beneficial relationship with their mentors. For example, Kirstin mentioned how she relied on her mentor when dealing with due process issues in which she lacked experience or knowledge:

When I got my first job, my mentor helped me so much, like, just had to teach me everything, like, you know, it was just like, I didn't know how to do anything,

even things like... we hadn't had a child study ... so I was like, what's the child study meeting like? What are we discussing here? Like what... I don't... you know because I didn't have like... It just was... I didn't get the full process, you know.

Despite the challenges of a hard year, the participants learned to use the material and human resources at their disposal. They used their resilience and their willingness to adapt and be flexible, and, as Anna said, they learned to give themselves “grace.”

Feeling Confident

When asked about areas in which they felt confident during their first year as licensed special education teachers, the participants did not share a lot of information. A few of them mentioned feeling confident in the classroom and behavior management. For example, Bob said that one of his “strongest areas is being able to effectively manage the classroom and make students aware of their behaviors, what they're doing correct and what they could do better at.” Other participants mentioned being confident in building relationships with the students, others mentioned building community, and one mentioned developing lessons.

While talking about their confident areas, some of them mentioned their vast experience as teacher assistants. It seems that they credited being strong in certain areas to the professional experience they acquired prior to the practicum. For example, Ally talked about being part of the school’s equity team for several years as a teacher assistant,

and due to this experience, she felt greatly confident in working on equity issues in her school during her first year as teacher:

So, I started as an education assistant, yeah, so I mean that kind of helped. Well, that helped a lot (chuckle). I've been working on [equity] for the last you know, years trying to, you know, make everything equitable in our school. So, I think that was something I was most confident about.

Jack said that he felt confident managing behaviors because of the experience he acquired during his years as a teacher assistant. Bob also mentioned his background as a teacher assistant, and credited being confident in managing the classroom to his experience as a teacher assistant:

My background before becoming a teacher was a paraprofessional and I was always very good at classroom management and being able to run the classroom and keep students calm and, you know, in the classroom, so that carried over to once I became a teacher.

Lucy was not a former teacher assistant, but she also credited her strength area to past job experiences. Lucy indicated that her strength during her first year as teacher was behavior management. At first, she mentioned that she was good in this area because she had had a lot of practice during her practicum experience. However, later she mentioned that she felt confident in behavior management because of her prior experience as a camp counselor dealing with children with serious behavior issues:

I felt confident in dealing with behaviors because I did a lot of that in my student teaching and I... my background before that was in like special recreation and we did a lot of really intense behaviors, so I felt, I felt confident.

Lucy also mentioned that she felt strong in building relationships with the students and making them feel safe in her classroom. She shared that her first year as a licensed teacher was a hard year, but she felt confident that she was being the best teacher she could be: "I was like doing the best that I could with what I was given."

Like Lucy, Kate also said that she was greatly confident building relationships with her students and building community. Unlike Lucy, Kate had not worked as a teacher assistant and did not mention having prior experience in that area.

Only Jess mentioned an academic area as his strength. He stated that he felt confident in developing and teaching lessons because he worked alongside his Professional Learning Community (PLC) colleagues developing their own curriculum and finding resources:

Our PLC, we were very good as we developed all our own curriculum, we were very good at finding resources and leaning on the chapter to develop curriculum to teach to the standards... so I think on the academic side of things, I felt very confident... I was very confident in what I taught, in researching, and developing my curriculum.

All the participants mentioned feeling confident in their technological skills during their first year as teachers. They also mentioned learning these skills during their practicum. Specifically, they mentioned learning how to integrate multimedia into the curriculum and into the instruction, how to use Google classroom, how to use Zoom, how to post assignments online, how to create content, and utilize online resources, how to produce videos, and how to be creative with assignments. The participants recognized that learning technology was an unplanned effect of the pandemic. As Bob said, “I think, had it not been for this pandemic and distance learning, I probably wouldn’t be as well versed in using the amount of technology that I do use in my classroom.”

While reflecting on these statements, I realized that technology was the only strong area mentioned that was learned during the practicum. For the other areas mentioned, it seemed that the participants attributed part of their strengths to the jobs they did, either before their practicum experience, or during their first year as licensed teachers.

Lacking Confidence

During their first year as licensed special education teachers, the participants mentioned lacking confidence in due process and IEP procedures, teaching, curriculum modification, and lesson planning. Many blamed this lack of confidence in the eventful practicum experience they had. Lucy’s words describe the participants’ feelings at the beginning of their first year as licensed teachers:

I just had a lot of confidence issues with going into teaching because I felt like I didn't finish my program and I felt like I didn't know really how to be a teacher, because I didn't get that experience of like going through an entire day as an independent teacher.

Carrie also talked about not feeling confident in the areas of curriculum and instruction. She criticized her undergraduate program because she said she was not taught how to modify a curriculum, or how to write lesson plans when one does not have a specific curriculum from which to draw information:

I feel like within our undergrad [program] we don't learn about curriculum and modifying it, but then, when I got to my school and, you know, have the random resources for reading, a few for math, I just kind of, you know, what do I do?
(chuckle)

Like Carrie, Bob also talked about feeling uncomfortable with his day-to-day lesson planning based on specific standards. He recognized it was extremely challenging for him to read a standard, and based on it, develop coherent and engaging lessons leading to that standard. He stated that it is “draining to continually come up with engaging lesson plans to want [the students] to be internally motivated to do their work.”

Both Kate and Jack expressed lacking confidence in online instruction. Jack mentioned that he was teaching a subject course in which he had no knowledge, and the online resources were not necessarily the best material for his students. Kate also had

problems with her online materials because she was a resource teacher, hence, she did not have a specific curriculum from which to draw lessons. On top of that, she mentioned having issues with students' engagement. She said:

I didn't know how to do lessons online, and I didn't know what I was looking for ... engagement was so hard to get from my students, so I didn't know how to capture [online teaching]... and like it was so hard to capture that online anyways that I just felt like I had no idea if I was making Picasso or if I was just making a mess kind of thing...

Due process and IEP procedures were mentioned many times as weak areas during their first year as teachers. As student teachers, most of the participants had opportunities to observe an IEP meeting, read IEPs and in some cases, even help in writing parts of IEPs. However, when they were the licensed teachers in charge of leading the meetings, it was challenging for them. Several participants mentioned that there were documents that were part of the IEP process that they had not even seen before because they were not taught or emphasized enough in any of their college courses. Some of them specifically mentioned the Prior Written Notice (PWN):

I also felt like there was some paperwork stuff that they didn't teach us in classes, like, I never even remembered hearing about a Prior Written Notice, and you send that out with the IEP and maybe they did talk about it, but clearly there wasn't enough emphasis on it, because I remember being like what the heck is a Prior

Written Notice? ... and that's like super important so it's crazy that they didn't talk about it... I don't remember even learning about it in college.

Other issues related to IEPs were mentioned by Jess and Kate. Both said they did not have the background to write transition IEPs. Both felt that, during their classes, the emphasis had been in elementary-level IEPs. In addition, Kate felt that one of her weaknesses was doing progress monitoring, especially when the goals were socioemotional. She recalled that this was an area that was not sufficiently covered in her courses. Jess remembered that, during his first year as teacher, he had to rely heavily on his colleagues during IEP meetings until he learned. He said that he:

did have a lot of support, but it was a lot of... kind of learning things the hard way, jumping into IEP meetings I'm in, leading as best I can but also kind of leaning on my admin who was in the meetings... so those first couple IEP meetings were not super fun.

All the participants thought that a more traditional practicum experience would have filled some of these gaps, helping them feel more confident. As Lucy said. "I felt like, how am I ever going to feel confident going into a class teaching? I've never really had a full day of teaching independently."

To summarize, the theme *Working in the field*, includes the participants' reflections about their first year as licensed special education teachers. They acknowledged that the type of practicum they had affected their confidence as teachers in

technical areas, such as lesson planning, teaching online, and the paperwork related to special education. They mentioned how their prior working experience helped in some areas such as behavior management. They realized that part of their role as teachers was to become “safe places” for their students. They also realized that, as special education teachers, they are part of a team of professionals working toward the same goals. They recognized that, throughout their hard experiences, they tried to be flexible, to adapt, and to give themselves “grace.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

Using a constructivist grounded theory design, this study investigated the following research questions: For special education teachers who completed their student teaching in spring of 2020, (1) What were their perceptions about their experience during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum? (2) What challenges did they face during their first year as licensed teachers? (3) What aspects of online education do they recommend being implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?

Question 1: For Special Education Teachers Who Completed their Student Teaching in Spring of 2020, What Were their Perceptions about their Experience During the COVID-19 Related Online Teaching Practicum?

When talking about their practicum, the participants mentioned feeling anxiety, uncertainty, and stress because of the many unexpected changes they had to endure during the semester, such as the lack of information from the university and the banning from the schools; however, they also recalled feeling joy when working with the students and building rapport with them, and satisfaction with themselves for successfully finished their practicum.

The participants reported entering this experience with expectations similar to what has been reported in other studies: to learn their craft through hands-on experience, which is an expected result of a practicum (Cohen et al., 2013). The participants talked about wanting to learn about general skills, like “how to implement materials and

curriculum,” to specific skills like “just learning all the different steps of due process.” They wanted to observe and shadow their host teachers, who have years of experience under their belts and who chose to participate as guides and mentors to student teachers. Ultimately, the participants wanted to be able to learn to manage and teach a group of students while “just kind of having someone kind of take me through the process.” According to the two literature reviews included in this study (Cohen et al., 2013; Lawson et al., 2015), all these aspects have been determined to be reasonable expectations for a practicum experience.

Spring of 2020 was marked by the declaration of a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, which affected all areas of life. The student teachers in this study lived through this situation while they were in the middle of their practicum experience. They acknowledged that their practicum experience was going well until the schools transitioned to online education. When remembering the feelings provoked by this transition, the participants used words like “anxious,” “frustrated,” “depressed,” “stressed,” and “uncertain.” These feelings mirrored the experience of Gonzalez-Calvo et al.’s (2020) student teachers participating in their study, who felt the same way when they lost the in-person instruction. These findings also resembled what Son et al. (2020) found in their study. In their study, the participants indicated that their stress and anxiety had increased due to the pandemic; however, these emotions decreased once their professors reduced course loads and adapted the courses’ requirements. Likewise, in the current study, the participants felt less stressed and uncertain when the university adjusted the requirements for graduation and guaranteed the participants its support.

Other studies reported having similar responses from both students and licensed teachers (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; McDevitt & Mello, 2022; Sayman & Cornell, 2021).

Of course, each participant's road to the new normal depended on a myriad of factors besides the change in course requirements, such as their individual characteristics (e.g., background knowledge, work experience, overall disposition toward challenging situations, and particular life circumstances), their expectations toward the practicum, and support received from others. Some participants decided to take their situation into their own hands and

advocated for themselves to make their practicum the best experience possible, given the circumstances, which resembled the reactions of student teachers and licensed teachers in other studies (Kim, 2020; Schuck & Lambert, 2020; Weir et al., 2020). Another participant took the circumstances at face value and opted to do the minimum required. These reactions illustrate the participants' level of resilience and adaptability. For example, when told that she was not allowed to work with students online, one participant decided to look for another placement. Other participants looked for ways to improve their practicum by looking for opportunities to help teachers in their placement school. In contrast, when one student was told "you may stop the practicum at this point," that is what he did because, as he said, he thought that his host teacher did not include him in activities since she did not need him, and he then decided not to look for new ways to be involved in his practicum. As found in other studies, some people had a harder

time than others adapting to the new normal and believed that they lost the opportunity to complete their academic formation (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). Despite the challenges, all the participants mentioned learning to be flexible and to adapt to the 'new normal' as student teachers, which helped them navigate their first year as teachers.

Besides resilience and adaptability, their reactions also illustrate motivation and initiative. Some participants volunteered or were asked to produce didactic material to post online. They had no experience on how to do this, yet they learned to utilize new technologies, created materials appropriate for their students' grade levels, posted them, and established meaningful connections with the students. This initiative was also found by Weir et al. (2020) in their study's participants, when they took charge of their practicum experience and used their creativity to produce an assortment of virtual materials.

Another interesting product of the practicum experience under pandemic circumstances is that the participants realized the value of asking for help and collaborating with each other. During their practicum, they were in constant communication with the university faculty, with their host teachers, and with their classmates. This seeking of support is what Kim and Asbury (2020) defined as emotion-focused strategies intended to alter the emotional experience of stress. The participants in my study talked about having several ways of communication with their classmates using

social media, which helped them not only be constantly informed about their situation, but also shared experiences, frustrations, questions, and concerns.

This sense of sharing and collaboration was also evident during their first year as licensed teachers. Due to the gaps in their professional skills development because of their peculiar practicum experience, they knew they had to rely on their coworkers to be effective in their jobs. The participants talked about the invaluable help they received from their colleagues, especially in matters related to due process and IEP documents.

Each time I read the interviews, I was amazed at the participants' motivation and resilience through a very difficult and discouraging time, both personally and professionally. Despite the fundamental change in their practicum, the lack of support from their school site and/or host teachers, the anxiety, stress, and personal problems in some cases, the participants did not lose sight of their ultimate goal, which was to graduate on time as planned and be ready to teach. However, it is also evident that the participants did not reach their goal by themselves. Indeed, they acknowledged being supported along the way by different people, including university faculty, classmates, and some host teachers. Instead of a fulfilling and very educational practicum experience, the participants had to live through a mediocre experience that did not quite fulfill their expectations, but, as one of them said, there was a pandemic and "it was nobody's fault."

Question 2: What Challenges did They Face During their First Year as Licensed Teachers?

The participants started their first year as licensed special education teachers in the 2020-2021 school year. During this time, we were still living the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and most of the schools were still doing online instruction. The participants remembered working with their students exclusively online during the first two or three months of the school year. Eventually, they started doing hybrid instruction, which included teaching both online and in-person.

Analyzing their recount of their first year as teachers, it seems that the participants had mixed feelings. They recalled feeling unsure in many essential areas of teaching, including lesson planning, classroom management, curriculum building, online instruction, and special education paperwork. This finding is worrisome because it suggests that the practical part of the teachers' program was not as comprehensive as it should have been; therefore, the participants might have entered the professional arena without the necessary experience to be as effective teachers as they could have been. On the other hand, being a teacher is more than developing and teaching lessons. Teachers are an important element of the students' well-being, which goes beyond academic goals (Schuck & Lambert, 2020). As the participants of this study were able to experience, teachers provide a safe place for the students, a constant in their lives, and a person with whom they can talk and share important issues in their lives (Kim & Asbury, 2020). It is thought-provoking that, when discussing their original expectations for their practicum

experience, the participants only mentioned practical issues, what one could call ‘tools of the trade’: lesson planning, classroom management, confidence in front of a group of students, and due process and IEP knowledge. All these areas are participant-focused. However, when reflecting about their positive and meaningful experience as licensed teachers, the participants mentioned areas that are student-focused: developing rapport with the students, seeing the students’ progress, providing a safe place, being someone whom students trust, providing a constant in their lives. The participants acknowledged that these areas were the ones that were the most meaningful and rewarding for them, which suggests that they were acting and reacting as effective teachers. As Kim (2020) noted, whether it is in-person or online instruction, the skills to be a good teacher remain the same. Indeed, good teaching, “involves interacting with children, building rapport, keeping their attention, encouraging, listening and questioning” (Kim, 2020, p. 155). Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships are not only qualities of an effective teacher, but also important elements of teachers’ identities (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

A challenge the participants mentioned experiencing as student teachers was the lack of experience with special education paperwork, mainly, due process and IEP documents. During their practicum, the participants had some opportunities to experience IEP meetings and to study documents, but these experiences were not enough to prepare them to be the ones in charge of this area. Several of the participants blamed this lapse in their learning not only on their fragmented practicum experience, but also on the academic preparation they received at the university level. The pragmatic side of this lack of knowledge in due process and IEP procedures is that, during their first year as

teachers, the participants had to rely on their colleagues. In a sense, it is a continuation of their experience during the practicum, when the participants relied on support staff and classmates to get through it.

Thus, the participants kept learning and adapting to get through their first year. They showed the same resilience and determination they showed during their practicum. As the student teachers in Weir et al.'s study (2020), the participants tried to keep a positive attitude in the face of challenges during their first year as teachers, continuously adjusting instruction and remaining grateful, as they had during their practicum. Even though as new teachers the participants felt unprepared in many areas of their job and they attributed this lack of confidence to an unconventional practicum experience, they did not mention negative feelings toward their job or lack of motivation during their first professional year, which had been noted elsewhere as possible effects of COVID-19 (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020).

Question 3: What Aspects of Online Education Do They Recommend Being Implemented Into the Teaching Practicum Post COVID-19 Pandemic?

When answering this question, the participants were adamant in recommending courses in online instruction, not only about virtual resources and instructional platforms, but also about synchronous and asynchronous teaching. The same recommendation has been suggested by other researchers (e.g., Kim, 2020; Sayman & Cornell, 2021). These researchers noted that online instruction has become an important area for all teachers to know, regardless of the state of the pandemic. Indeed, this is supported by the

participants in this study, who stated that they currently utilize more online resources, even during in-person teaching. Therefore, including preparation for best practices of online instruction in the teacher preparation program is very likely to be helpful (Kim, 2020; Weir et al., 2020).

Another suggestion about online instruction was regarding what a participant called “online etiquette.” Because virtual engagement is relatively new, people do not always know what the appropriate etiquette is. A participant mentioned people in meetings wearing casual wear. Another participant mentioned students in virtual classes with their cameras off, which does not provide their teacher clues about motivation and engagement. Therefore, it would be useful to teach student teachers guidelines for courteous and professional communication in the online environment, so they might be role models for their students, parents, and colleagues.

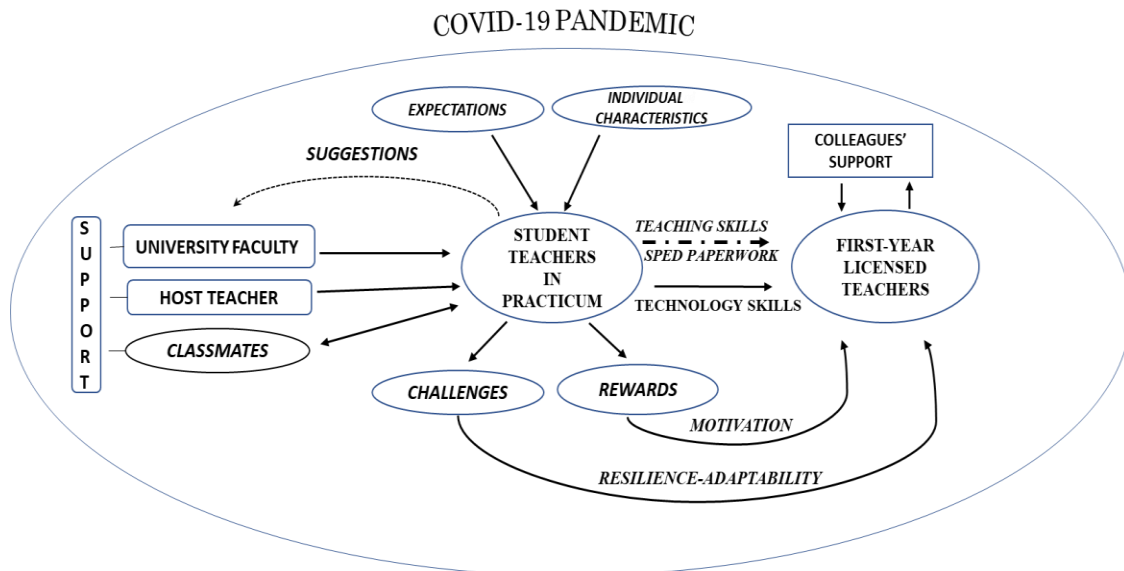
The participants had other suggestions not quite related to online instruction but very important if student teachers were to experience a positive online practicum experience. One suggestion had to do with having clear expectations from all people involved in the practicum experience: student teachers, host teachers, and supervisors. The participants think that the practicum is an important experience for the student teachers; therefore, it is not a good idea to interrupt it. Since they experienced a period in which they did not know if they would be able to continue their practicum, they suggested that the University develop general guidelines for unexpected events during the practicum. Another suggestion relates to providing a scheduled time and space for

student teachers to share experiences, ask questions, or vent frustrations. Such space is important as an emotional-focused coping mechanism (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Explanation of the Conceptual Framework

“The most common outcome from a grounded theory study is greater conceptual clarity, or a conceptual framework, which is short of theory in the sense of a comprehensive system of ideas intended to fully explain and predict something” (Timonen et al., 2018, p. 4). Accordingly, based on the findings discussed above, I developed a framework to explain the perceptions of the special education student teachers about their teaching practicum of spring of 2020 and the challenges they experienced as first year special educators. The diagram for the framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

The framework is enclosed inside an oval, denoting that the participants’ experience during their practicum and their first year as licensed teacher was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework includes ovals and rectangles. The ovals concern the student teachers, while the rectangles concern all the other parties involved in the student teachers’ experiences, both during the practicum and during the first year as teachers (Figure 1)

Figure 1***Conceptual Framework: Learning to Teach During the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The student teachers who participated in the study are at the center of the framework. They brought to their teacher practicum experience their individual characteristics (background knowledge, work experience, overall disposition toward challenging situations, particular life circumstances), and their expectations to the practicum. Depending on these individual characteristics, their reaction to the different challenges differed: some participants advocated for themselves to make their experience richer, while some others accepted the new circumstances without questions and did not try their best to make the most out of them. Depending on their expectations, the participants showed a variety of emotions such as frustration, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress, a finding also mentioned elsewhere (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020). I placed, at the left of the framework, the support received by the student teachers. This support was in

place even before beginning the practicum, because both the *university staff* -faculty and supervisors- and the *host teachers* were working behind the scenes to make the practicum experience possible. So, by placing the support at the left of the oval representing the *student teachers in practicum*, it was my intention to highlight this constant support before and during the practicum. Of course, this support was present throughout the practicum, it was instrumental in the overall experience of the participants, and it is represented in the framework with arrows going from the university staff and host mentors to the oval representing the student teachers during practicum. Another important source of support was provided by the participants, who supported each other by sharing experiences, asking questions, and venting frustrations. This relationship is included in the framework with an oval and a double arrow to represent the constant communication among the participants throughout the practicum. Originally, I had not included this relationship in the framework. However, I added it due to a suggestion given by the participants during a members' checking meeting.

The participants of this study faced challenging experiences that, in their opinion, negatively affected their practicum, but they also faced experiences, which they deemed as rewarding. In the framework, the rewarding experiences were included as the *rewards* of the practicum that the participants mentioned throughout the interviews, specifically working with the students, building rapport with them, seeing their progress, planning and implementing lessons, learning from their host mentor, having support from university faculty, host teacher, and classmates, and fulfilling requirements for graduation. These are aspects that had been mentioned as positive elsewhere (e.g., Kim &

Asbury, 2020). The challenging experiences were included as the *challenges* of the practicum. These challenges were manifested mostly after the transition to online teaching and included experiences such as not being able to work directly with the students, losing contact with the host teacher, not being able to develop their professional skills, not receiving feedback from the university supervisors, uncertainty regarding the requirements needed for graduation, a sense of helplessness of not knowing how to better contribute to their practicum, and low students' engagement. These aspects were also labeled as challenges in existent literature (e.g., Lambert & Schuck, 2021; Sayman & Cornell, 2020).

The rewards of the job gave the participants *motivation* to continue working toward their ultimate goal, which was to graduate and be licensed as educators. The challenges brought out the participants' *resilience* and *adaptability*, which drove their will to keep trying their best to learn as much as they could within the constraints they had during their practicum. The amount of *resilience* and *adaptability* showed varied among the participants, depending on their individual characteristics and their expectations toward the practicum. Advocating for themselves in different situations, looking for educational opportunities, learning new ways of teaching, adapting to new ways to connect with students and host teachers, persevering through hours sitting waiting for students to engage, managing stress and uncertainty, asking for help, and keeping positive regardless of the challenges were some of the ways in which the participants conveyed resilience and adaptability. The participants used their motivation,

resilience, and adaptability shown during the practicum to help them confront the challenges of their first year of teaching.

The participants considered that the challenges they faced during their first year as teachers were caused by the transition to online instruction during their practicum, which prevented them from working directly with the students, and thus, they did not have enough time to develop their teaching skills sufficiently. Because of this, they felt a lack of confidence in many areas at the start of their first year as licensed teachers. These areas included lesson planning, class management skills, instruction, curriculum building, and modifications to online teaching. Likewise, due to lack of opportunities, the participants considered that they were not able to learn fully the nuances of the special education paperwork, such as due process and IEP procedures. Thus, they started the first year as teachers with gaps in their knowledge of these documents. In the conceptual framework, I used a broken arrow to illustrate the participants' fragmented development of teaching skills and knowledge of special education paperwork. This arrow goes from the oval representing the practicum to the oval representing the first year of teaching as licensed teachers because these are the skills the participants brought to their jobs.

Due to their lack of knowledge of both teaching skills and special education paperwork, the participants sought support and advice from their colleagues in general, and their first-year mentors in particular. As Kim and Asbury (202) noted, looking for support from colleagues is a characteristic of effective teachers. This support is represented with a rectangle placed above the first-year teaching oval with arrows that go

both ways, which illustrates the constant communication between the participants and their colleagues.

As suggested by a participant during a members' check meeting, I included in the framework the participants' technological skills. These skills, developed during the practicum, represent a strength that was brought by the participants to their first year as teachers. Thus, I included an arrow with a continuous line to illustrate the participants' technological skills.

Finally, one of the research questions had to do with suggestions given by the participants to the university staff regarding improvements they could make to the teaching practicum. The participants offered suggestions related, not only to technology issues but other issues as well. This relationship was illustrated in the framework with a dotted line because these suggestions were not given directly to the university staff but to me, who in turn will share them.

Even though this framework reflects the perceptions and experiences of the practicum of a particular group of student teachers, it could also reflect a typical practicum experience of any student teacher. Most likely, student teachers doing their practicum receive support from their university staff and their host teachers; they also might have close relationships with classmates who provide support. Regardless of the school placement and mode of instruction, student teachers experience challenges and rewards during their practicum, and their responses to them most likely differ depending on the students' individual characteristics and personalities. They also bring to their

professional life skills that they have learned or developed during their practicum, but they also may bring weak areas in which they would need support, which is usually provided by their mentor and other colleagues. The difference between this particular practicum of spring 2020 and other practicums at other times might be the types of *challenges* and *rewards* the student teachers experienced, and the way they responded to them. Most likely, the arrow denoting the teaching skills and the knowledge about special education paperwork would be a solid arrow, signifying a more complete and solid learning. In addition, the arrow denoting the *suggestions* given to the university staff may or may not be there, depending on each university's practicum.

With these findings, I have tried to describe the journey that the participants of my study went through during their practicum and their first year of teaching. As I mentioned earlier, despite the challenges, they realized that they have become stronger, more resilient, and more adaptable. Even though it seems the pandemic is finally under control, the future is still uncertain. Teachers will need great flexibility, resilience, patience, and collaboration from colleagues, as the new variants of COVID-19 keep appearing and the uncertainty this provokes is likely to continue to be a source of stress and anxiety (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Validation of the Conceptual Framework

As suggested by Brantlinger et al. (2005), qualitative studies must ensure that their findings are credible and trustworthy. Following their suggestions, I implemented several common measures:

-Thick detailed description: I included sufficient quotes when discussing the data to provide more realistic and richer descriptions as evidence for my interpretations and conclusions.

-Clarification of researcher's preconceptions: By being open and explicit about my personal preconceptions, positions, and perspectives, I am acknowledging that the findings were shaped by my personal background.

-Member checks: This strategy refers to taking the final report back to the participants to determine whether they feel it is accurate. For this study, I met individually with three of the participants. The purpose of these meetings was to provide validation for the conceptual framework. I included the members' suggestions below.

-Peer debriefing: Having someone familiar with the phenomena studied provides feedback on analysis and interpretations that add validity to the findings. For this study, I asked the university staff in charge of the practicum during the spring of 2020 to comment on the findings and conceptual framework I developed. I included the comments of the university staff below.

-Research reflection: By writing frequent memos throughout the research process, I continuously reflected about comparing data, generating categories, and establishing relationships. In this way, memoing helped me identify my preconceptions and clarify my thinking (Charmaz, 2014).

Member Checking and Peer Debriefing Feedback

After studying the conceptual framework and listening to the explanation about the different elements and the relationships among them, the three participants with whom I met as part of the validation process opined that the conceptual framework illustrated their practicum experience. They made additional comments about some of the elements that, although interesting and relevant, could not be included in the findings or the conceptual framework because the participants did not include that information in the interviews. For example, one participant commented that the special education paperwork was different depending on the district, since each district has a different way of doing this. Thus, there is a learning curve each time that the teachers move to a different school district. Another participant commented that during her first year, the school administration relied on the teachers to support students in their mental health.

Additionally, I asked for feedback from the university staff in charge of the practicum, who was mentioned by the participants during the interviews and, therefore, had firsthand knowledge of the participants' experiences during their practicum. I listed below the relevant feedback given by the three participants and the university staff. Based on this feedback, I made changes and additions to the findings and the framework:

-The participants thought that the challenges and rewards should be clearly listed in the explanation of the framework. Therefore, I added the elements identified as challenges and rewards as suggested.

- One of the participants suggested that ‘*a sense of helplessness of not knowing what to do to contribute to their practicum*’ should be included as part of the challenges. As a result of this suggestion, I did include it in the list of challenges.

-According to the data, the participants’ expectations for the practicum included learning about due process, IEPs and related paperwork. However, due to the pandemic, this expectation was not fulfilled and thus the participants’ knowledge of the special education paperwork was fragmented when they started their first year of teaching. The participants suggested that this fragmented knowledge should be included in the framework along with the fragmented teaching skills to illustrate areas in which they did not feel confident during their first year. Therefore, I included the words *SPED paperwork* below the dashed arrow that also represented *teaching skills*.

-The participants concluded that, according to the findings, the participants developed strong technological skills during the practicum; therefore, the conceptual framework should include these skills as a strength brought to the first year of teaching. Accordingly, I included an arrow representing *technological skills*, going from the oval depicting the practicum to the oval depicting the first year of teaching

-It was suggested that, because the university support was integral to the participants in navigating the challenges, a visual should be included linking the university support with the line of resilience and adaptability. After thinking about this suggestion and discussing it with my advisor, I decided that the arrow that goes from the rectangle representing the university support to the oval representing the practicum is

sufficient to illustrate this support. The university support, in conjunction with the other types of support (i.e., host teachers, supervisors, classmates) and other elements (i.e., individual characteristics and expectations) were the factors that made the participants' practicum unique and affected the way they reacted to the challenges and rewards. Therefore, the university support, while important in helping the participants navigate the challenges, was not the only influence.

-The participants noted that, according to the findings, the support provided by the classmates was informal but important for the participants and it should be included in the framework. Therefore, I added an oval depicting the *support from the classmates* below the other types of support.

Limitations and Further Research

As with other qualitative studies, this study does not aim at generalizing its results, since it presents the experiences of only 11 teachers from a pool of 40 possible participants in one university setting. Although I followed the guidelines of constructivist grounded theory, this study might have benefited from a larger sample in order to strengthen the precision and theoretical plausibility of my analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Further research might be conducted with larger samples and more diverse groups of special education teachers.

Even though I asked the participants to talk exclusively about their experiences and perceptions about their spring 2020 practicum experience and their first year working

as licensed teachers, their responses might have been influenced by their most recent working experiences. Future research should include other sources of data, such as pertinent written documents (e.g., reflection journals or university papers written by the participants at the time of their practicum), focus groups, and the perceptions of the university supervisors and host teachers involved in the practicum.

The teachers who chose to participate in this study might have inherent individual characteristics that helped them navigate their practicum experience differently than other teachers who chose not to participate. Likewise, the participants' personal abilities and coping mechanisms to manage stress, anxiety and uncertainty may be stronger than average, which might have affected their perceptions of the practicum experience. Future research may include instruments, such as the General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7, Spintzer et al., 2006), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS, Cohen et al., 1983), to evaluate the impact of these traits and coping mechanisms in the student teachers' way of reacting to difficult situations.

The participants talked about having a support community among their classmates. This support might have affected their responses to the challenges they endured during their practicum, therefore, their perceptions of the practicum might have been entirely different from those of participants in the same cohort who did not have peer support.

The semi-structured interview used to gather data was designed by me based on the existing literature and my own experience as a special education teacher during the

spring of 2020. Lastly, this study is limited because it was filtered through my own point of view. Despite my efforts to remove my preconceptions from the interpretation of the data, my perspective was part of the processes required to construct the study and develop the conceptual framework.

Implications of the Study

Most likely, the COVID-19 pandemic will have lasting effects in the way students are educated, and it is imperative that educational institutions act proactively to navigate such effects. Thus, universities with teacher preparation programs may consider making changes or additions to their programs in order to fulfill the requirements of practicums so their students graduate with all the necessary skills to be effective teachers in the ‘new normal.’ Suggested additions to the students’ programs include best practices in online learning, technological learning, and tools to both develop and teach resilience and mindfulness.

As other student teachers around the world, the participants in this study experienced stress due to their lack of technological skills, giving them no option but to learn during their practicum. Because of the rapid inclusion of technology in education, it is essential to prepare future teachers better in this area so they can provide high quality instruction (Gyimah, 2020). This is especially important for special education student teachers because their students may need ample support, not only to navigate the technology but also to actually learn content using means other than traditional instruction. Thus, future special education teachers need to learn and keep current in

using learning management platforms as well as research-based strategies for teaching online. Such knowledge will be useful even if they teach in-person. Therefore, it is advisable to enhance teacher preparation to better prepare future teachers to use a variety of instructional technology (Gyimah, 2020). When student teachers can practice and prepare for online teaching, they become more effective teachers (Kim, 2020).

Additionally, as suggested in this study, preparation in online etiquette should also be provided. Student teachers should learn how to interact with colleagues, students, and parents in a courteous and professional manner. Because online instruction is fairly new and most people involved were not trained in online etiquette and therefore cannot be role models in this area, it is important for future teachers to enter the field with at least a basic knowledge of it.

An important effect of the pandemic on student teachers and teachers is the emotional toll. According to some research, this emotional toll might affect teacher burnout and attrition (e.g., Kim & Asbury, 2020; Sayman & Cornell, 2020), which would present additional problems to already troubled educational systems. Indeed, the participants in this study experienced negative emotions during their practicum, such as anxiety, uncertainty, and stress, which impacted their experience. Therefore, it would be useful to include courses to provide students with techniques and mechanisms that teach them to face adversity, such as resilience lessons, mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques and counseling. Likewise, because special education student teachers will eventually work with a vulnerable population, they should receive training in emotional

teaching, so they can provide to their students not only a safe space but also teach them coping mechanisms to learn to be resilient.

The importance of having support among students, and among students and faculty has been mentioned in several studies, including this one. It is recommended, then, that the university encourage and/or provide virtual, in-person, or hybrid scheduled spaces for the students where they have opportunities to interact with each other and the faculty to ask questions, share concerns, or vent frustrations, since seeking emotional support is a common and recommended way to cope with stress (Kim & Asbury, 2020). “These spaces provide emotional support, help alleviate feelings of isolation, and increase confidence and enthusiasm for work” (Carrillo & Flores, 2020, p. 471).

The participants of this study mentioned several areas in which they felt unsure of their knowledge. These areas included lesson planning, class management skills, instruction, curriculum building, and modifications to online teaching. The participants attributed this gap in knowledge to the difficulties they had during the practicum. Indeed, some areas, like classroom management, are mostly learned during hands-on activities, such as a practicum. However, other areas, such as curriculum building and lesson planning can and should be developed before the practicum, throughout the education program courses. It would be sensible to further examine if these areas are being sufficiently covered in the education curriculum. It would also be sensible to examine if recent student teachers, who did not experience the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic in their practicum, considered themselves lacking competence in those areas. If

they do, the following advisable step would be to determine how to strengthen those areas before the student teachers begin their practicum.

Recent research, such as the studies included in this dissertation, has focused mostly on the effect of the pandemic on teacher education. There is not enough information about the effects of COVID-19 on professional teachers who did their professional practicum during the pandemic period. It might be important to research the deficiencies and strengths in the teaching practices of those teachers. Such information might be relevant for university stakeholders and school districts to plan their courses and professional development accordingly.

The pandemic has forced the world to do things in new ways, including education. Online instruction has become a new way of reaching students, and they want online options post-pandemic (McKenzie, 2021). Online instruction is convenient during pandemics, but it might also be convenient during other events in which students cannot attend their schools due to safety issues (e.g., natural disasters, school fires), lack of resources (e.g., shortage of teachers), or personal reasons (e.g., expulsion, sickness). Online instruction can provide opportunities for additional support (e.g., asynchronous instruction) or individualized support (e.g., synchronous instruction) regardless of location and time. Online platforms have given teachers and parents a more convenient and personal way to communicate. This is particularly important in special education. Going forward, student teachers should be prepared to be as effective teachers as they can be, regardless of the mode of instruction. However, since online education is a relatively

recent introduction in most schools, it is important to research topics such as students' engagement, support, and academic progress during online instruction.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer three research questions: (1) What are the student teachers' perceptions about their experiences during the COVID-19 related online teaching practicum? (2) What were the challenges the then special education student teachers had to face during their first year as licensed teachers, due to the changes in their practicum? (3) What aspects of online education do the special education student teachers recommend to be implemented into the teaching practicum post COVID-19 pandemic?

Regarding the first question, the data presented a painting of mixed emotions, going from stress and anxiety at the beginning of the pandemic to adaptation and resilience at the end. The participants navigated the unexpected challenges in different ways, according to their individual characteristics and their expectation to have a meaningful practicum experience. The participants found that an important influence in the experience was the host teachers. The support from the university staff and peers also influenced their experience. Even though their disrupted practicum helped them develop resilience and adaptability, the participants entered their professional field feeling unprepared.

As explained in the literature review chapter, Cohen et al. (2013) identified four goals of a practicum experience. The first goal of a practicum is to promote the student

teachers' professional abilities, such as using different instructional approaches, and to promote teaching skills and efficacy in teaching. The second goal of a practicum is to strengthen the student teachers' knowledge of the school's internal and external environment, including learning to get acquainted with various cultures and to adapt teaching methods to them. The third goal is to promote the student teachers' personal growth, including the development of their cognitive skills, reasoning skills, and critical reflection. The fourth goal of a practicum is to impact the school by promoting the students' knowledge and academic achievement. When analyzing the participants' practicum against these goals, it is noticeable that their practicum felt short. They did learn different approaches and teaching skills, although their learning was somewhat fractured. They did grow as people and professionals. However, the opportunities to be part of a school community were very limited, as were the opportunities to promote the students' academic progress. The participants expressed that the changes due to the pandemic were the cause for their lack of educational opportunities during their practicum.

When answering the second question, the data revealed a lack of confidence in the participants. As stated, they felt unprepared for their job as special education teachers. They felt unprepared in many key areas, such as lesson planning, special education documents, classroom management, and instruction. They attributed their unpreparedness to the transition to online practicum since they were trained for in-person instruction. Their lack of confidence made their first year on the job hard, prompting the participants to rely on their mentor teachers and colleagues to provide support in those weak areas.

However, they used their resilience, adaptability and motivation to face the challenges. Despite those challenges during the first year as teachers, the participants did not mention negative feelings or lack of motivation toward their professional work.

Concerning the third question, the participants recommended more online instruction, such as synchronous and asynchronous practices, and learning platforms. The participants also gave suggestions not related to technology. They recommended to the university faculty to provide a deeper preparation regarding special education procedures, specifically, due process and IEPs, and to strengthen university-host teachers' collaboration.

In summary, this study adds to the growing body of research related to the effects of COVID-19 in student teacher preparation in general, and for special education student teachers in particular. Since the study is qualitative, its findings cannot be generalized to other settings. This study included student teachers who experienced the pandemic when it broke, however, it is still going and it is still affecting them as licensed teachers. More research is needed to understand the impact that the pandemic has had and keeps having on special education student teachers and teachers who graduated during the pandemic in order to implement measures to minimize or prevent educational gaps before these student teachers begin their work as licensed teachers.

The contributions of this study are twofold. First, it recorded the experiences of this particular group of special education student teachers who became teachers during an unusual historical context. Second, it provided an interpretation of a specific practicum

experience, through a conceptual framework, which may be useful to analyze practicum experiences in order to find areas where improvements may be needed.

References

- AJMC Staff (2021). A Time of COVID-19 Developments in 2020. *American Journal of Managed Care*. ajmc.com/view/a-timeline-of-covid19-developments-in-2020
- A New Virtual Reality. (2021). *College of Education and Human Development Connect Magazine*, 15(2), 15.
- Bates, A.W. (2001). *National strategies for e-learning in post-secondary education and training*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO.
- Bierschbach, B. (2020a, March). Minnesota Governor Tim Walz Closing K-12 Schools as COVID-19 Spreads. *Star Tribune*. Retrieved May 22, 2021 from <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-schools-will-close-for-eight-days-due-to-coronavirus-pandemic/568812082/>
- Bierschbach, B. (2020b, March). Governor Tim Walz Orders Minnesota Classrooms Closed for the Rest of the School Year. *Star Tribune*. Retrieved May 22, 2021, from <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-schools-closed-rest-of-the-year-by-order-of-gov-tim-walz-over-coronavirus/569890762/>
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative Studies in Special Education. *Exceptional Children*, 71(2), 195-207.
- Busher, H., Gündüz, M., Cakmak, M., & Lawson, T. (2015). Student Teachers' Views of practicums (teacher training placements) in Turkish and English contexts: A

comparative study. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 45(3), 445–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2014.930659>

Carrillo, C., & Flores, M.A. (2020). COVID-19 and teacher education: A literature review of online teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 466-487.

Çelik, Ö., Yorulmaz, A., & Çokçalışkan, H. (2021). Preservice primary school teachers' beliefs about the consistency of the teacher training program on the formation of their teacher identity. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 8(2). 1279-1290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1820480>

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. London, EN: Sage.

Chun-Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine*, 7(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2050312118822927>

Cohen, E., Hoz, R., & Kaplan, H. (2013). The practicum in preservice teacher education: A review of empirical studies. *Teaching Education*, 24(4), 345-380.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2012.711815>

Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). Perceived Stress Scale [Database record]. *APA Psych Tests*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t02889-000>

Creswell, J.W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Donitsa-Schmidt, Smadar, and Rony Ramot. 2020. Opportunities and challenges: Teacher education in Israel in the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Education for Teaching* 46(4), 586–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1799708>

Emergency Executive Order 20-19, Minnesota Statutes § 12.31 (2020).

https://mn.gov/governor/assets/2a.%20EO%2020-19%20FINAL%20SIGNED%20Filed_tcm1055-425019.pdf

Executive Order 20-82, Minnesota Statutes § 12.21 (2020).

<https://www.leg.mn.gov/archive/execorders/20-82.pdf>

Ersin, P., Atay, D., Mede, E. (2020) Boosting Preservice Teachers' Competence and Online Teaching Readiness through E-Practicum during the COVID-19 Outbreak.

International Journal of TESOL Studies. <https://doi.org/10.46451/ijts.2020.09.09>

Flores, M.A. (2016). Teacher education curriculum. In J. Loughran & M.L. Hamilton (Eds.), *International Handbook of Teacher Education* (pp. 137-186).

Gonzalez-Calvo, G., Bores-Garcia, D., Barba-Martin, R., & Gallego-Lema, V., (2020).

Learning to be a teacher without being in the classroom: COVID-19 as a threat to the professional development of future teachers. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 152-177.

- Guri-Rosenblit, S. (2005). 'Distance education' and 'e-learning': Not the same thing. *Higher Education*, 49(4), pp. 467–493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-0040-0>
- Gyimah, N. (2020). Assessing Technological Innovation on Education in the World of Coronavirus (COVID-19). *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3670389>
- Henriksen, D., Creeley, E., & Henderson, M. (2020). Folk pedagogies for teacher educator transitions: Approaches to synchronous online learning in the wake of COVID-19. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 201-209.
- Hodges, T.S., Kerch, C., & Fowler, M. (2020). Teacher education in the time of COVID-19: Creating digital networks as university-school-family partnerships. *Middle Grade Review*, 6(2). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol6/iss2/4>
- Howatt, G. (March 14, 2020). Minnesota declares peacetime emergency to combat coronavirus as cases rise to 14. *Star Tribune*, Retrieved May 20, 2021 from <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-declares-peacetime-emergency-to-combat-coronavirus-as-cases-rise-to-14/568772352/>
- Hoyt, L.T., Cohen, A.K., Dull, B., Castro, E.M., & Yazdani, N. (2020). "Constant stress has become the new normal;" Stress and anxiety inequalities among U.S. college students in the time of COVID-19. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68, 270-276.
- Kidd, W., & Murray, J. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on teacher education in England: How teacher educators moved practicum learning online. *European*

Journal of Teacher Education, 43(4), 542–558.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1820480>

Kim, J. (2020). Learning and teaching during COVID-19: Experiences of student teachers in an early childhood education practicum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(1), 145-158.

Kim, L. E., & Asbury, K. (2020). ‘Like a rug had been pulled from under you’: The impact of COVID-19 on teachers in England during the first six weeks of the UK lockdown. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(4), 1062–1083.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12381>

Lambert, R., & Schuck, R. (2021). “The Wall Now Between Us”: Teaching Math to Students with Disabilities During the COVID Spring of 2020. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30(3), 289–298. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00568-8>

Lawson, T., Cakmak, M., Muge, G., Hugh, B. (2015). Research on teaching practicum: A systematic review. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(3), 392-407.

Lederer, A.M., Hoban, M.T., Lipson, S.K., Zhou, S., & Eisenberg, E. (2020). More than inconvenienced: The unique needs of U.S. college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Health Education & Behavior*, 48(1), 14-19.

McDevitt, S.E., & Mello, M.P. (2022). From crisis to opportunity: Family partnership with special education preservice teachers in remote practicum during the COVID-19 school closures. *School Community Journal*, 31(2), 325-346.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1323067.pdf>

McKenzie, L. (2021). Students want online learning options post-pandemic. *Inside Higher Ed*.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/04/27/survey-reveals-positive-outlook-online-instruction-post-pandemic>

Minnesota's K-12 schools closing for at least 8 days, Walz says—StarTribune.com. (n.d.).

Retrieved May 20, 2021, from <https://www.startribune.com/minnesota-schools-will-close-for-eight-days-due-to-coronavirus-pandemic/568812082/>

Mohamad, N.N., Husnin, H., Diyana, S.N., & Halim, L. (2020). Mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic: A snapshot from Malaysia into the coping strategies for pre-service teachers' education." *Journal of Education for Teaching* 46(4), 546–53. h

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1802582>

Moyo, N. (2020). COVID-19 and the future of practicum in teacher education in Zimbabwe: Rethinking the 'new normal' in quality assurance for teacher certification. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 536-545.

- Nel, C., & Marais, E. (2020). Preservice teachers' use of WhatsApp to explain subject content to school children during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning, Special Issue, 21(5)*, 629-641
- Paulsen, T., & Schmidt-Crawford, D. (2017). Enhancing student teacher supervision through hybridization: Adding e-Supervision to the Mix. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 58(2)*, 166–179. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2017.02166>
- Petretto, D.R., Carta, S.M., Cataudella, S., Masala, I.; Mascia, M.L.; Penna, M.P.; Piras, P. (...) Masala, C. (2021). Some lessons learned in the use of distance learning with students with special educational needs during COVID-19 outbreak. *Education Sciences, 11(3)*, 118-120. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11030108>
- Roth, A., Ranjan, N., King, G., Hodayun, S., Hendershott, R., & Dennis, S. (2021). Zooming in on COVID: The intimacies of screens, homes, and learning hierarchies. *Anthropology in Action, 28(1)*, 67-72.
- Sayman, D., & Cornell, H. (2021). “Building the plane while trying to fly:” exploring special education teacher narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Planning and Changing, 50(3)*, 191-207.
- Schuck, R.K., & Lambert, R. (2020) “Am I doing enough?” Special educators’ experiences with emergency remote teaching in spring 2020. *Education Sciences, 10(11)*, 320-335. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/10/11/320>

- Son, C., Hedge, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Farzan, S. (2/2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9). <https://www.jmir.org/2020/9/e21279>
- Spitzer, R.I., Kroenke, K., Williams, J.B.W., & Lowe, B. (2006). A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: The GAD-7. *Arch Intern Med*, 166(10), 1092-1097. DOI: 10.1001/archinte.166.10/1092
- Stover, S. (2019). Working with student teachers 'at risk' during early childhood practicums: Reflections from five associate teachers. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 16(1), 4-30. <https://doi.org/10.24135/teacherswork.v16i1and2.281>
- Sullivan, F.R., Garron, H., Larke, L., & Reich, T. (2020). Using Teaching Moments during the COVID-19 pivot. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 303-313.
- Timonen, V., Foley, G., & Conlon, C. (2018). Challenges when using grounded theory: A pragmatic introduction to doing GT research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1). <https://doi-org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/10.1177/1609406918758086>
- The Coronavirus Spring: The Historic Closing of U.S. Schools. (2020, July 2). *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-coronavirus-spring-the-historic-closing-of-u-s-schools-a-timeline/2020/07>

- Trust, T., Carpenter, J.P., Krutka, D.G. & Kimmons, R. (2020). #Remote teaching and #Remote learning: Educator tweeting during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 151-159.
- UNESCO (2020). COVID-19 educational disruption and response. Retrieved May, 19, 2021 from <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-educational-disruption-and-response>
- UNESCO (2021). #Learning never stops. Retrieved May, 19, 2021 from <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>
- Weir, K.M., Wohlman-Izakson, M., & Gilic, L. (2020). Teaching & learning during COVID-19: Alternative instructional activities through individualized learning plans. *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 3(2), 16-25.
- White, H.R., Stevens, A.K., Hayes, K., & Jackson, K.M. (2020). Changes in alcohol consumption among college students due to COVID-19: Effects of campus closure and residential change. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81(6), 72-730.
- World Health Organization. (2022). *World Health Statistics 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news/item/20-05-2022-world-health-statistics-2022>
- Zientek, L.R. (2007). Preparing high-quality teachers: Views from the classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(4), 959-1001.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207308223>

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview

Hello. My name is Cristina Umana-Rojas, and I am a graduate student from the University of Minnesota, Department of Special Education. I am calling/meeting because you agreed to participate in an interview that will be used to write my dissertation. This dissertation aims at documenting how the COVID-19 pandemic affected your experiences as a special education student teacher during your student teaching practicum. I am also interested in knowing if the student teaching practicum circumstances affected your first year as a licensed special education teacher, and I also want to know your opinion of what elements of online education would enhance future student teaching experiences.

All personal information, including your name and answers will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared with any person or group that is not associated with this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

The interview has two parts: the first one consists of 25 open-ended questions. Some of the questions concern your experiences as a student teacher during your practicum, and others ask you about your experiences during your time working as a special education licensed teacher. Some of the questions might sound repetitive to you, however, I ask you to answer as comprehensively as you can even if you think you are repeating information.

The data collected from this study will be summarized and no individual person will be identifiable from the summarized results. Responses to questions may be quoted, but without identifying the individual source. The interview should take about 60-90 minutes to complete. You will be compensated for your time.

Are you ready to continue? Please read, sign and date the consent form before we begin the interview.

Thank you! Let's start with some general information about yourself.

Section 1: Professional Data

Semester/Year of student teaching experience: _____

Grade level of the practicum (mark all that apply):

Pre-K K 1-3 4-6 7-8 9-12

Placement during the student teaching:

Inclusion class Resource Room Self-Contained Class

Out-of-district placement Other: _____

Number of weeks you did your student teaching exclusively ONLINE: _____

Approximate dates: _____

Years of experience as a **licensed teacher**: _____ Level(s) taught: _____

Placement: _____

Type(s) of teaching certification(s) you have: _____

If you are not working as a special education licensed teacher, what is your current employment or area of study? _____

Questions:

1. What does 'student teaching' mean to you?

2. What did you expect from your student teaching experience?
3. How did these expectations change due to the coronavirus?
4. How was the change from a face-to-face to online practicum for you? Who helped you with this adjustment/change? What kind of help did you receive?
5. How did you interact with your students on a day-to-day basis during the online portion of your practicum? (After their initial response, ask them to provide examples.)
6. What do you think was lost by not having a full semester “traditional” (face-to-face) practicum?
7. What skills or preparation do you think were missing from your professional practicum due to the change from face-to-face to online instruction?
8. What skills/tools/strategies did you learn during the online portion of practicum that you carried forward into your teaching career?
9. In the next few questions I will ask you about how you learned about IEPs.
 - a. Were you able to participate in an IEP meeting?
 - b. Was it online or face-to-face?
 - c. What was your role?
 - d. Were you able to study IEP documents?

- e. Was this experience helpful? In what ways?
10. Were you able to collaborate in the writing of an IEP? In what ways?
11. Describe one of your most challenging experiences during the ONLINE portion of your practicum.
12. Describe one of your most rewarding experiences during the ONLINE portion of your practicum.
13. How was your relationship with your practicum mentor?
14. How was your relationship with the college professor in charge of the practicum?
15. How did the ONLINE part of the practicum affect your professional development as a teacher?
16. Thinking about your WHOLE semester of practicum, what was the most rewarding experience? What was the most challenging experience?
17. Thinking about your experience as a student teacher during the pandemic, describe your teaching practicum in a few words or sentences.
18. Tell me about your experience as a licensed teacher: what do you like most about being a special education teacher? What do you like least?
19. As a licensed special education teacher, what has been your most rewarding experience? And your most challenging experience?

20. Thinking back about your first year as a licensed teacher, in which professional areas did you feel less confident? Please give examples.
21. During that first year as a licensed teacher, in which professional areas did you feel confident? Please give examples.
22. Overall, how did your experience in the teaching practicum help you now that you are a licensed teacher?
23. What is the MOST valuable thing you learned during your practicum?
24. If schools were mandated to provide online instruction again, what suggestions would you give to provide a meaningful teaching practicum experience to future education students?
25. OVERALL, with 1 being the LOWEST and 10 being the HIGHEST:

How would you rate your student teaching experience in terms of learning/training on how to be a special education teacher?
26. Tell me about your mental health during your practicum experience.
27. Did you have a designated time with your cohort to get together and talk about what was happening during the practicum?

Appendix B: Examples of Memos

As examples of the analysis that occurs throughout the coding phases, I am including three memos I wrote during different stages of the analysis. I was writing for myself and was interested in the material and not the style, so the memos may have errors, since I did not edit them.

In the first memo, I was in the first stages of organizing the categories about the participants' practicum experiences in a coherent way that may lead me to a theme.

Organizing CATEGORIES- About the practicum

The participants talked about different things about the practicum. They talked about how difficult it was to talk with the students because they did not connect as much as they were expected to. The participants also talked about feeling lost when the transition happened because they did not know what they were supposed to do. I think this is where most or all of them talk about feeling uncertain and stressed out without me asking about their mental health. Many talked about how much they liked their practicum when they were in-person, and they were expecting to participate more actively after the spring break. Of course, that is when chaos happened. I think these topics belong in a theme which includes all the pieces pertaining to the practicum itself. Things like student engagement and what they actually did during COVID should be included. Also the data about the host teachers and the support they received from them. The participants talked

a lot about not learning due process and that kind of stuff but I don't think that belongs in the same theme, although I don't know where could I put it then??

In the second memo, I am still writing the same categories about the participants' practicum experience, but I am analyzing if the data in a particular category is too broad and should be divided in two different categories.

Organizing CATEGORIES- About the practicum -2

I was thinking I need to break the category "What I did during the practicum?" into two different categories: practicum BEFORE COVID and practicum AFTER COVID. I think that makes more sense and it will tell the students' stories better. I have been thinking about the category Placement. Is it necessary? I guess it is, it is important to know what grades and content areas the participants were placed in.

In the third memo, also about the participants' practicum experience, I am in the final stages of deciding what categories to include in the first theme. Note that the categories I finally included in this first theme are different from the ones I was originally thinking about including.

First theme -about practicum perceptions (first question)

I think the categories that need to go into the participants' stories are expectations (first one), placement, teaching before covid, teaching after covid, engagement of students, grading the practicum. The category 'EAs before practicum' does not need to be a category, I think. It is not that important and it does not add much to the story about the

practicum. I'll keep the data to see if it can be added elsewhere. So I think I have the first theme re: Practicum.

Need to find an in-vivo phrase to title it, maybe??

In the fourth memo, I was reflecting on the participants' emotions and reactions to their practicum. I was working on the conclusion chapter.

Adaptability and resilience

They knew things were different than the 'normal.' They knew they had to improvise, do things differently, learn new things that were not taught because they were not expected to be needed. They did not receive the opportunities that they were expecting because they were not open to them due to strenuous circumstances. So they showed flexibility and adapted to the new conditions. They show resilience. As one of them said 'it is what it is'... They went from college students to professionals not feeling prepared, but they were even though they did not realize it at the time. Some of them are graduate students, but some are just undergraduates. I mention this because most of them showed maturity and resilience and sheer determination to keep on going with their life plan even though some are very young.