

# Talk Story: The Experiences of Teaching Special Education During the Pandemic

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## Abstract

The pandemic was a challenging time. In order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, many schools were forced to close. To continue to meet the educational needs of students, educators transitioned instruction to distance learning. This abrupt shift may have had adverse effects on students with disabilities and the teachers who work with them. Thus, the purpose of this manuscript is to provide special education teachers an opportunity to share their pandemic related teaching experiences.

### Key words:

special education, special education teachers, specialized instruction, mental health, Free Appropriate Public Education

The onset of the pandemic was a challenging time (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE] Office of Civil Rights [OCR], 2021). Many students, teachers, and administrators faced the unimaginable as schools around the world closed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. It has been estimated that these closures impacted 1.57 billion worldwide (UNESCO, 2020).

In the U.S., 77% of public schools transitioned some or all classes to distance learning during spring 2020 (Berger et al., 2022). This was a significant increase when compared to the 21% of public schools that offered at least some classes over distance learning during the 2017-2018 school year (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Suddenly teachers, some of whom have never had the training to provide effective online instruction, were tasked with learning how to teach virtually. While these challenges impacted all students, teachers, and administrators, it is possible that the effects of the pandemic weighed more heavily on students with disabilities (SWD) (Gao, 2020; USDOE OCR, 2021).

In Hawaii, the phrase “talk story” is synonymous with the sharing of stories. Affonso et al. (2007) describes the process as: ...keen listening while another is telling his or her story, not disputing the content of another’s story, and rallying in support of one whose emotions flow in the mid of a story. The flowing of emotions sanctions the depth and meaning of one’s story and encourages others to follow in expressing intimate feelings. (p. 403)

One method of learning more about how the pandemic impacted SWD would be to ask the teachers who worked directly with this population. Thus, the purpose of this manuscript is to provide special education teachers a forum in which they could “talk story”. Before the teachers’ share their experiences, a brief overview that describes how the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) impacts the education of SWD in the U.S., will be presented. Knowledge on this subject will provide a contextual framework of the requirements that special education teachers are responsible for addressing in their professional careers as they work with SWD.

### **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) is U.S. federal law that serves, “to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 [d] [1] [A]). The Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) that eligible SWD receive must be provided at no charge and must be appropriate based on their respective Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).



The IEP is a document that describes the special education and related services that the student will receive. The two IEP components that are of interest to this manuscript are how the student's disability impacts the individual's general education curriculum progress and the types of specialized instruction and related services (e.g., speech therapy, audiology services, etc.) that the student is to receive.

FAPE and the IEP are two elements of the IDEA put in place to address both the inequality and inequity of the education that SWD received prior to the law's inception in 1975. With in-person instruction, it is definitely possible for a special education teacher to work with the IEP team, which includes the student's parents, to craft an IEP, and then use it to guide instruction to effectively provide a FAPE. The shift to virtual learning made this process challenging for many special education teachers, leading to feelings of uncertainty, despair, and grief as they did their best to continue providing a FAPE.

## Talk Story

The remainder of the manuscript will present the stories of special education teachers as they worked to meet the needs of their students during the pandemic. This will be accomplished by first introducing a pandemic related issue, then providing the educator the

opportunity to present their stories related to the trials and traumas, as well as the tribulations and revelations they experienced.

## Impact On Students' Educational Progress

While we may never know the full effects of the pandemic on SWD, the data available provides a disheartening picture. First, when compared to pre-pandemic academic performance, there was an increase in the amount of SWD receiving failing grades during the pandemic (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2020). Second, student attendance decreased (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021). For example, the American Institute for Research (2021) reported that only 74% of SWD participated in assigned distance learning activities. Third, SWD were less engaged (Parents Together Foundation, 2020). For example, based on Fall 2020 data, Morando-Rhim and Ekin (2021) reported that 53% of Los Angeles Unified School District high school SWD submitted online coursework. Finally, many of the services that SWD needed were either not provided (Parents Together Foundation, 2020), or were not comparable to the services pre-pandemic (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021). For example, a survey of 744 school districts found that 61% reported difficulties with delivering speech therapy over distance learning (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020).

This statistic is particularly troublesome as data from the USDOE (2022) suggests that 16.3% of the 6,410,219 students ages 6-21 who received special education under IDEA, were diagnosed as having speech or language impairments, and thus needing speech therapy. While this is a sizable amount, students diagnosed with other types of disabilities (e.g., autism or intellectual disabilities), may also receive speech therapy, making the impact on SWD significant.

### **Joselyn Castañeda, MA**



The first teacher voice is Joselyn Castañeda. She is a special education teacher who has worked with students with intellectual disabilities from transitional kindergarten up to second grade. The 2021-2022 school year was her fourth year of serving as a teacher in the state of California. Joselyn describes her experiences with working to meet her students' education needs during the abrupt shift to distance learning. She then discusses how the increased health and safety guidelines impacted the return to in-person instruction. Joselyn then closes by summarizing what she is thankful for.

### **FAPE and Distance Learning.**

When thinking of special education teaching, one thing that comes to mind is a free appropriate public education (FAPE). As a special education teacher ensuring FAPE is met on a regular basis can be challenging, but ensuring it is met during a pandemic has been one of the hardest things I have done in my career as a teacher. When we were told we were going fully online the first thing that came to my mind was, how was I going to ensure that my students received a free appropriate public education? The simple answer was that solely online instruction was not going to be enough. After much planning I decided that I had to ensure my students had access to tangible lessons that would capture their attention. This included toys, crayons, counting

counting manipulatives, paper worksheets, playdough, and many more items. Items that many of my students did not have access to at home. This meant that in order to fulfill my duty as a teacher, I would have to find a way to get these items to my students. I was able to get some items donated and some items I just bought out of pocket. Once I had these items, I hand delivered them myself to each of my student's homes to ensure they still had not only FAPE, but an equitable education. Although these items helped motivate both me and my students, teaching online was a daily challenge. Whether it was trying to help parents manage behaviors through the camera, keeping students engaged for more than 15 minutes, or simply trying to navigate all the new technology that was thrown at us. Online learning was a daily challenge and once I felt I was getting into a rhythm, we were told we were going to go back to in-person learning.

### **Return To In-Person Learning.**

In-person learning during the pandemic was a completely new ball game and I found myself stumbling through the days scared of either getting sick with the virus or getting my students sick with the virus. It was such a hard time for me specifically because every day I felt like I was failing my students. I felt this way because the guidance for in-person learning was to wear our

masks at all times and keep a 6 feet distance between students. This meant that I was unable to provide a lot of the basic things that my students needed to succeed. How were my students supposed to learn letter sounds when they couldn't see my face? How were they supposed to learn social skills when they couldn't get near their friends? How were they supposed to learn to write letters and numbers when they couldn't receive any hand over hand guidance? Many days I felt like my students were being disproportionately affected by the effects of COVID-19 and there was nothing I could do to fix it. It was really hard for me to stand back and just let things go on, but as the days kept passing and the time kept moving, I found myself feeling a bit optimistic about the situation because of the people around me.

### **Powerful Interactions.**

Although the pandemic is still ongoing, and we are still facing many unknowns, I found myself thankful for the little things and grateful for the daily interactions I once avoided. Although I still struggle with ensuring FAPE is met on a daily basis, I have learned to take everything in stride and go with the flow. To not be as overwhelmed over things I cannot control. Now I enjoy daily conversations with my neighboring teacher, planning for fun in-person collaborative activities and just being around other people in a positive learning environment.



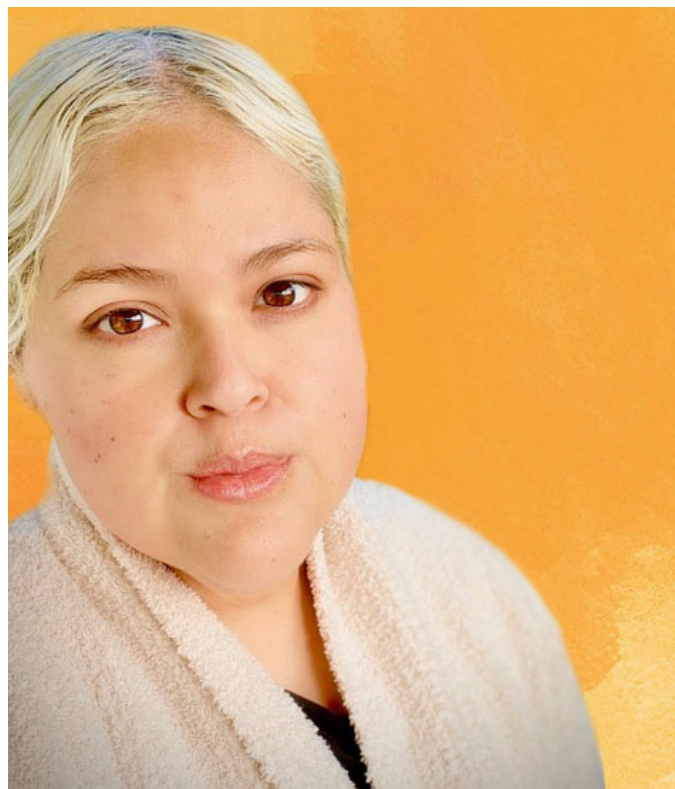
Knowing it could all be taken away in a flash as it was during the 2019-2020 school year makes me really appreciative of even the tough days. Overall, this entire ordeal has been the biggest lesson that I am still learning from to this day.

### Impact On Students' Mental Health

Using data collected on over 1,200 parents, Jones (2020) reported that 45% felt the separation from classmates and teachers that their children experienced was a “major challenge”. Other studies reported issues related to students' levels of anxiety, stress, and increased instances of being cyberbullied (Lessard & Puhl, 2021), as well as depression and loneliness (Gazmararian et al., 2021). In addition to these challenges, Asian American students also faced COVID related discrimination (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2022).



### Julie León, MA



Julie León, our second voice, is a high school special education teacher who works with students with mild/moderate disabilities. The 2021-2022 school year was her twelfth year overall working in schools and her fourth year of serving as a teacher of record in California. Here, Julie starts by describing the struggles SWD faced during the pandemic. She then discusses learning how to reach her students as instruction shifted back to the in-person classroom setting. Finally, Julie closes with a reflection on how serving as a teacher is more than lesson plans and grades.

## Student Struggles.

The first year of online learning did not provide students FAPE; however, this was by no fault of anyone or anything but a pandemic. No one was prepared for it and when we suddenly found ourselves sitting at home in shock and awe, we, all who are involved in the educational system, desperately scrambled for solutions while trying to cope with everything at hand. Even in the chaos, school districts managed to still provide learning opportunities for free to all. Despite these good intentions, our students suffered...especially our students with disabilities. Our students with disabilities need specialized services and supports that help them meet their educational needs. Without these, how could we have FAPE? It simply was not happening. Online learning, especially at the genesis of the pandemic, was failing them and us. It was heartbreaking to see students lose family members to a virus while trying to figure out how to use a Chromebook and the hotspot the district provided from their school's parking lot. That year, kids disappeared from the radar, some dropping out because online school was too much yet simply not enough.

## Starting From the Beginning

Coming back to the classroom was incredibly stressful. I felt like a brand-new teacher. I was worried I had forgotten to be in front of students and

react to real faces and not black boxes. Coming back to the classroom was incredibly stressful. I felt like a brand-new teacher. I was worried I had forgotten to be in front of students and react to real faces and not black boxes with white-lettered names on a computer screen. I was worried about getting sick and maybe dying. The first day back, students were apprehensive while gazing from their medical-grade face masks, unsure of me, each other, and school in general. They looked like they hadn't done this before and they hadn't really, not like this. I felt broken and my students felt broken. This made me shift my way of teaching. I focused on social-emotional skills. I fought hard to build relationships with the most withdrawn of my students. I sought to comfort those who had lost dads and moms and grandparents. I sympathized with those who had to get jobs during the pandemic to help their parents put food on the table and pay rent. This school year (2021-2022) was familiar but not, in an alternate reality type of way where the students feared for their lives daily while relearning basic skills, teachers were fighting the piling lists of duties and tasks and trainings, while we all pretended it was perfectly normal and fine.

## Teaching Is More Than Letter Grades.

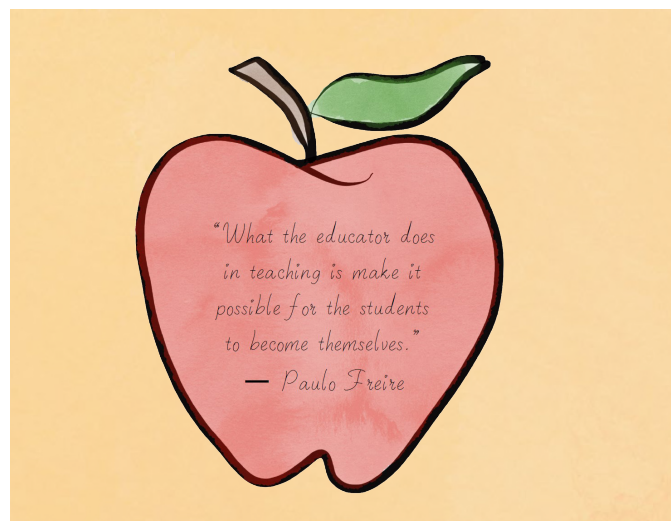
While online learning was challenging, we, my students and I, were able to build something...a coping mechanism of sorts where we logged onto Zoom to see



our names and maybe hear each other's voices for some semblance of normalcy. Some of my Zoom classes became very much like families, where the students sang Happy Birthday to each other and spoke about their lives or highs and lows for that week. We laughed and even cried. In the privacy of turned-off cameras, kids were willing to become vulnerable because they knew we all needed each other. I miss that. Being back in the classroom further reinforced this thought. As educators our duty does not stop at teaching our students but knowing and understanding them. The pandemic changed how I approach my teaching for the better. Yes, I have become skilled at using all these platforms, applications, and fancy websites that the district has paid thousands upon thousands of dollars for. Most importantly, however, I've learned to regularly allocate time for social-emotional learning, reflection, and sharing in my class. This is something I picked up thanks to the pandemic. It has helped my students build strong bonds among each other and myself. We help each other. With all sincerity, because of this, some of the best memories of my life have happened within the four walls of my classroom with my students right by my side.

## Impact On Instruction

Prompts are a form of instruction frequently used by teachers to increase the probability of a student responding correctly. Examples of prompts include verbal solve an equation). Though all teachers use prompts, special education teachers frequently use physical prompts with SWD. Physical prompts are where teachers provide students with physical assistance, such as a teacher physically guiding a student's hand when teaching how to write his name. With distance learning, it was no longer possible to utilize physical prompting without the assistance of family members. Challenges with using instructional strategies, such as physical prompting, could be one of the reasons why Jackson and Bowdon (2020) reported that 82% of school districts experienced difficulties with providing SWD, "hands-on instructional accommodations and services", over distance learning (p. 4).



**Leslie Nelson, PhD**

The third voice is Dr. Leslie Nelson. In her over 30 years of working in schools, she has served as a teacher of record at the preschool, elementary, and middle school levels. She has also served as a teacher coach, special education facilitator, professional development trainer, and has taught courses at the university level. She is currently an elementary school special education teacher in the state of Nevada. In her narrative, Dr. Nelson describes the impact that the pandemic had not only on her unprecedented career as a teacher, but also the impact on her students during the onset of the pandemic. She

then discusses preparing for the 2020-2021 school year as a special education facilitator before transitioning back to being a classroom teacher.

**Transition to Distance Learning.**

The Friday before the first shut-down occurred, the principal came into my last period English class. This was odd because in a large middle school administrators do not visit special education classrooms unless there is a matter of great urgency. At his heels was the school's tech guru. As he walked in, it became apparent that he was in door-to-door mode, he looked at me and smiled, "Dr. Nelson, you already have a Google Classroom up and running, don't you"? One of my students piped up immediately, "What do you think we are doing right now Mr. P"! He turned to the guru and said, "All good here".

Before the last bell rang an announcement was made for all staff to report to the library. At this meeting we were told to take home any materials we needed to teach from home for a few weeks, just enough time for the school to possibly go through a "deep clean". I started having flashbacks of my students' actions over those past few days, one of whom would not take off a pair of rubber gloves and was spraying everything with Lysol and the other who had been wearing gloves and a surgical mask rolling on the floor crying that he

didn't want to die from COVID. After the meeting I said a quick good-bye to my favorite staff members, gathered the book we had been reading in my English class, and headed for the door not realizing that it would be June before I would be allowed back onto campus.

That evening there was breaking news with the governor announcing a temporary closure of all schools in our state. He referred to it as a 10-day pause while all schools undergo deep cleaning and the state assessed to determine the safety of the students and their families to return to school. As the governor was giving his address my son walked through and said, "You know mom, you aren't going back to your school this year." After listening to the governor's address and the follow-up questions, I left a Google Classroom message for my students letting them know that I would have a Google Meet on Monday that they can join using their phones or tablets.

For the remainder of the school year, I held class via Google Meet, posted assignments in Google Classroom, and used Google Meet to record myself reading our book, *The Watsons go to Birmingham*. As I urged students to join class via Google Meet, I was surprised to find that the students who had been the greatest behavior problem when learning face-to-face, were the most engaged and productive during distance learning.

### **Helping Other Teachers.**

During the summer I changed schools and positions from classroom teacher to special education facilitator for three schools. As we moved closer to go back to school, we received the dreaded news...we would start the year teaching from home. For my new position this meant assisting teachers with revising IEPs over distance learning.

As the school year started, I kept my virtual office door open for the special education teachers at all three schools. I found that supporting a group of educators during times of uncertainty was equally as difficult as supporting students and their families. The greatest difficulty fell with writing the IEPs to include service minutes for distance and hybrid education models and what that service looked like when provided. I spent hours in my virtual office ensuring teachers that they would be alright and their students would be okay as well.

### **Return To the Classroom.**

During the 2021-2022 school year I again shifted positions, choosing to work as a special education resource teacher at a Title I school. During the year there were only 3 families out of more than 30 IEPs I held that elected to attend in-person. Many of the families that attended virtually stated they did so for reasons of convenience. Out of



the 30 IEPs there was only one that a family member did not participate in. This was a huge increase in family participation from my past experiences.

As a result of teaching online and coaching special education teachers, most of whom struggled to teach online, my philosophy on using technology has changed. My 2nd and 3rd grade students came back into the school building craving face-to-face attention and wanting to learn. They didn't want to see a video showing a math strategy or use their Chromebooks all the time. They wanted to hold a book, use their dry erase boards to solve math problems, and talk to their classmates in small groups. My philosophy of student growth shifted from using technology to watch a video to see how to solve a math problem to watching a peer solve it while explaining what they are doing. My students returned to in-person instruction well below where they should have been and it has taken thoughtful planning and instruction to begin to close the gap.

This summer, instead of taking a break from work, I am collaborating with a general education teacher on a standards-based grade level interactive journal for our incoming students. We are hoping this will help close the gaps in reading, writing, and fine motor skills that resulted from distance learning. Before the COVID closures, I would have wanted to create the materials for students to use in an

in an online platform...now I see the importance of students creating their own learning materials with thoughtful guidance from their teachers.

### **Impact On Teachers' Mental Health**

Pre-pandemic, many special education teachers experienced job related stress, exhaustion, and burnout (Hester et al., 2020), all of which disadvantage SWD as it contributes to teacher shortages. COVID-19 seemingly took those feelings in teachers and then amplified them. For example, Cormier et al. (2021) surveyed special education teachers in the U.S. and found that they experienced "moderate to extreme" levels of anxiety, stress, depression, and exhaustion as a result of the pandemic (p. 1768). As stated by a participant in Kim et al. (2022), "I feel like I'm on overload. My brain feels like a browser with 100 tabs open. There is so much to think about all the time" (p. 309).



**Ina Mae Tevaga, MA**



Our fourth voice is Ina Mae Tevaga. She is a high school special education teacher who teaches math to SWD. The 2021-2022 school year was her fifth year of working in schools and her fourth as a teacher of record in California. Ina Mae begins by describing the challenges of transitioning to distancing learning while caring for two young children at home during the onset of the pandemic. She then discusses the challenges related to the return to in-person instruction and the fears of contracting COVID. Ina Mae then closes by mentioning that she's grateful for the support her administration has provided.

**Work/Life Balance During the Pandemic. v Preparing For In-Person Instruction.**

Upon returning to in-person schooling, teachers were asked to be vaccinated and have a negative COVID test. The fear of contracting COVID has always been a concern because of my daughters. They are young and I do not want them to experience the dreadful agony of COVID symptoms. The first week was professional development for all staff members. Our administrators planned a retreat for our staff, and not everyone had received their COVID testing results before the start of the retreat. This was alarming because the administrators decided to continue the retreat. Within the next few days, the results of some of the staff members were received, and one of the staff members tested positive. Everyone in close contact with this person was contacted and had to quarantine. This test showed administrators that, although we were all vaccinated, we were not all safe from COVID. It was a scary moment for me because I have never contracted COVID. After the first week of professional development, I felt more comfortable coming to work in-person.

**Administrative Support.**

I was asked to co-teach with two individuals who were first-year teachers. I was excited to learn from them and bounce ideas off each other. I worked

well with both my co-teachers. We were given multiple days to plan for our classes throughout the year, which helped tremendously because we were on the same page. In addition, the Special Education teachers were given IEP working days to work solely on IEPs. This decreased my stress level. My administrators understand when we ask for planning days or IEP workdays. They usually allow us to take those days if we have enough coverage. The 2021-2022 school year was tough, but it was doable because of the support we had for each other and from our administrators.

## Conclusion

Students and teachers have faced many difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as feelings of despair, uncertainty, and grief. The purpose of this manuscript was to provide special education teachers opportunities to talk story by sharing their experiences of teaching during the pandemic. Despite the challenges these teachers faced related to instruction and providing a FAPE, or personal and/or professional struggles with mental health, they have chosen to remain teaching. All four educators continue to serve their schools and heal their communities with knowledge and compassion, along with the experiences gained from teaching during the pandemic.

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