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Parents Accessing Special Education Services during the COVID Pandemic

By: Julie Petrillo

Abstract:

My research question asks: What is parents' experience teaching their special education child at home during covid? & What are parents' experiences with special education services at their child's school? The sample population was Parents of Special Needs Children in Connecticut. Using the snowball sampling method, which helped me find more parents to interview, allowed me to conduct qualitative virtual interviews. This enabled me to see the challenges that special needs families faced during the pandemic, which led me to conclude that suburban and urban families and schools had different challenges. Some schools could navigate the pandemic better than others, depending on where you lived. It is evident that disparities with special education still exist; however, the pandemic made these disparities stick out more. We can conclude that parents had to step in as teachers and navigate online learning with their child who receives special education services.

Introduction:

Special education has always been a vital topic to me, as someone who has received special education services since two. I would never be the student I am today if it wasn't for my special education teachers and parents along the way. Coming to Trinity and knowing I wanted to major in Educational Studies was a no-brainer, but we did not discuss this topic often. So when it came down to deciding what I wanted to do my thesis on, it was easy to choose this topic. Then when covid hit and read articles about what was going on with special education in school systems during remote learning, I wanted to know more. My thesis aims to address the experiences of suburban and urban parents through remote learning, what obstacles they faced, and seeing the differences in resources in each location. Each parent had their own

different experience, and some were able to navigate remote learning better due to money and to be able to be home with their child.

First, I knew I wanted to interview parents about their experiences with their child who receives special education services. I had a range of parents that their children had different disabilities. The severity of their disability depended on how much support and resources they needed. I had many parents concerned about their child falling behind. They knew with their disability; they were already behind. My interviews were with parents, and I asked a range of questions about their experiences before covid, how it was during remote learning, how communication was between parents and their child's school, and their child's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). We knew before this that there were disparities between suburban and urban schools, but the pandemic made them more evident and relevant.

The literature review highlights sources that gave me more background information about IEP's, parent involvement, and disparities between urban and suburban schools. With the sources I found, I tried to find ones related to the interview questions I was asking. I wanted it all to connect because there were certain sources that parents had talked about the same challenges. It sheds light for parents because they are not alone but felt like online learning was never over. Parents were most concerned about their child losing everything they were taught to them and disengaged with online classes.

Literature Review:

Special education for students with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic: "Each day brings new challenges" wanted to know how educators provided support for students on the

autism spectrum disorder. They sent out a survey to educators, telling them what changes they were making to their Individualized Education Programs (IEP's). They found that many educators were adding additional support and resources to their IEP's so that these specific students were getting something out of their virtual learning. The article states, "Social IEP goals were also changed, by being reduced and sometimes, totally removed. This was due to an inability to implement social interventions while in-person due to social distancing restrictions and difficulty tracking when attempted virtually" (Hurwitz). This was interesting because I am looking to see if schools had to make changes to IEP's. However, this approach relates to *Advocacy, Collaboration, and Intervention: A Model of Distance Special Education Support Services Amid COVID-19* because they shared a program to help administrators, educators, and parents with distance learning, especially students who need special education services. This relates to one another because parents did not know what to do with their children. So, if parents had been given a guide or some help, the transition could have been easier. Since parents did not know what to do, any direction would have been a help. The article states that "6.7 million students in the United States receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act" (Frederick, 749). In this program, parents would have someone checking in with them weekly, students would receive a handheld device, and the school would be communicating with parents by helping them get through the pandemic. We have people trying to help special education students, and our next step would be to have schools take the help

The No Child Left Behind Act: Challenges and Implications for Educators discussed how the NCLBA is crucial to students with disabilities. It required that states allow academic

achievement to increase for all students, especially students with disabilities. Which has been changed to Every Student Succeeds Act; it replaced the NCLB. The NCLB "is to ensure that all children have fair, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education, and to reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (Simpson, 68). This article wanted to ensure that teachers understood what was expected of them.

Parent involvement played a critical role during the pandemic. Parents who are educated can help their children out more because they have a high school diploma or a college degree, and this already puts your child ahead of other children whose parents did not.

Examining Parent's Involvement in and Perceptions of Special Education Services, conducted a phone interview to know how involved parents were with their child who has autism. The article stated that "The majority of parents (78%) believed that they had high to moderate knowledge of their child's IEP document" (Spann, 232). By this statement, most parents are involved with their child, which is excellent. It is essential to know that this survey was taken before covid, so it is vital that parents were involved with their child, and now, with home learning, parent involvement is more critical than ever. It is essential to know that some parents could work at home during the pandemic, which increased their parent involvement. As stated in *Parent Involvement with Special Education: Respecting Individual Preferences*, "Some people perceive parent involvement as a choice: others see it as a requirement" (MacMillian, 4). Depending on how you view it impacts your child, and even though it is the school's job to ensure they have resources; the parents always play a significant role in their child's education.

In Rural and Urban Communities, Kids still Struggle to Get Online, stated, "While school systems around the country have quickly pursued commendable fixes like mobile hot spots, device lending, and WIFI buses, problems this big- and this persistent are tough to tack in a few months" (Fleming). Depending on where you live and what school you attend has a significant impact on what resources are available to you and what ones you don't get. Another factor depending on your socioeconomic background will affect this because if you need more support and your parents can afford it, they will get it. Suburban families did not deal with not having WIFI or chrome books. Urban school systems had problems that would not be fixed overnight. This then relates to the article titled, *Money matters when it comes to your child's education and where they go to school. How Money Matters: The Effect of School District Spending on Academic Achievement* highlights that class size matters for student achievement. The article states that "students whose background would predict relatively low levels of achievement, schools with positive climate and good relations among principals, teachers, and students can expect to produce relatively high levels of achievement in students" (Wenglinsky, 223). It is resources that the school does not have, and class size plays a significant role. You will find that in urban school; systems, the class sizes are much larger than in suburban schools. Adding in that you have a disability; it is easy to get lost academically when your school's climate is low. Sometimes families cannot afford to live in suburban locations to send their child to a good school, and then the child suffers from lack of resources that their school provides and more students in their classes.

Now that students have been home for over a year in a half. Schools now allow parents to decide if they want their child to go back to school for fall 2020 after completing a semester

of online learning. The need for childcare, health, and safety were all concerns that were being brought up. *Choice With(out) Equity? Family Decisions on Return to Urban Schools During COVID-19* discussed the inequalities in schools, and with covid, they were more transparent. Parents had to pay for facial coverings, ensuring they had technology and WIFI at their houses. Especially in some schools in Hartford, CT, parents argued that classrooms have poor venation and were concerned that their child would attract the virus. Distance learning opened new challenges for parents. The article states that "remote learning forced parents into new teaching roles as proxy educators" (Cotto Jr). Still, parents argued that equity in schools does not meet the family's needs, especially families whose child receives special education services. Not only did parents step in as educators but what if English was a second language for you? Language proficiency and placement are often understudied, and their disability category tends to be disproportionate due to not giving children the right services. Some children who needed special ed time and ESL class stopped due to remote learning, so completing their work online was challenging because they could not understand it, and their parents didn't either.

According to Within- Group Diversity in Minority Disproportionate Representation: English Language Learners in Urban School Districts state, "disproportionate representation was defined as the "extent to which membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific education disability category" (Artiles). This is very challenging for the parents because their child is already disadvantaged. You can't do one without the other, so if you have a parent that is an ELL, then how can they step in as a teacher? It gets very challenging.

Parent involvement is critical no matter what. But when your child receives special services and can't follow the typical school curriculum for an average child, you need to be involved. Some parents through covid were in contact with their child's school and teacher to make sure their child benefitted from online learning. According to, *Why Special Education Isn't Special*, states that "Where parents are organized, they can provide pressure for better quality special education services within public schools" (Milofsky, 438). This is important because parents and schools need to work together. When the pandemic hit, parents had to communicate with their child's school if their child was facing any challenges. When parents know what is going on they will pressure their child's services, so they get the best support possible.

Data and Methods:

Sample Section:

I used the snowball method to get my interviews for my thesis. I knew of some parents already that I knew would say yes to me. So, it was just a matter of reaching out to them and coordinating a time for me to interview them. I asked parents if they knew of other parents whose child receives special education services and would be interested in talking about their experience. I was lucky that some parents had other parents in mind and gave me their contact information. I wanted to interview at least six parents and I had interviewed some fathers, mothers and then a special educator of New Britain public school systems. Interviewing an educator, I was able to get a sense of what special education educators went through just to get another perspective of their struggles. This allowed me to see both sides.

Data Collection:

The style of the interviews that I conducted were semi structured. I asked parents a total of five questions. I had my questions set up all on a word doc followed by under each question I had certain topics that I wanted parents to discuss. I asked about their child's experience with their special education services prior to the pandemic, this allowed me to get a sense of what went on before and during covid. I wanted to know their child's experience with remote learning and their IEP. I had read articles where IEP goals had to shift because special education students were not able to master those goals due to remote learning. I wanted to know if their child had regressed in anyway because parents that were home were able to see first-hand if their child was struggling. Then lastly, I wanted to know how communication was between parents and with their child's schools. Each question relates to the overall experience that parents had with their child who receives special education services and their child's school. Then after the interview was conducted, I sat down and wrote down my last initial thoughts of the interview in a journal and what parents were saying. Interviews lasted 30- 60 minutes and was approved by Trinity IRB.

Data Analysis:

After collecting all my data through my interviews, I had them transcribed and I printed them out. I had read through the interviews a good 3-4 times before I started taking notes and highlighting. I was looking for common experiences that parents went through, I was looking at the numbers, how much time their child was in special education services before and during the pandemic. This allowed me to see if the time spent in special education services was cut or stayed the same throughout remote learning. I had highlighted quotes from the parents describing their experience. To best organize my data, I made a chart. First column was parent 1, parent 2

all the way down to parent #6. Then the next column I had put the location of the school with the income is of that certain location. Then lastly, I had put each interview questioned I asked in its own box. The very last box I summarized what I was trying to say, and my interpretation of what parents were saying about their experience.

The Findings:

What is parents' experience teaching their special education children at home during Covid-19?
What are parents' experiences with special education services at their child's school?

Every parent had a different experience. However, we found that suburban schools had various problems than urban school systems. Urban schools had more gaps to fill, making online learning so much more challenging, especially for special education children. More suburban parents could work from home, spending extra time with their children, ensuring they did not fall behind. Many urban families could not work from home, and they felt like they were failing their children. Higher education was able to respond to the pandemic better than schools in urban communities.

Across the six interviews, the school's location played a significant role for students who received special education services when students were sent home for remote learning. Suppose you look at Woodbridge vs. Hamden, where the median family income in Woodbridge is \$157,610 and Hamden it's \$77,274. But if you look at New Britain school systems, the median family income is \$46,499. I had interviews from each of those locations and depending on where your child's school is counted on what resources they could provide to children who receive special education services when they were remote. Mother of Woodbridge said her experience was as good as it could have gone. Her daughter's resource room teacher would meet with her on zoom for extra sessions because learning online math was very challenging for someone with a

learning disability. Woodbridge School systems answered all the mother's calls and emails. IEP meetings were still in progress, but parents would be on the phone instead of at the school in the meeting room. Woodbridge school systems faced different challenges compared to urban school systems. Families in Woodbridge have resources, and parents will provide for their child when the school fails to or is not enough.

Hamden mother, with a son who has severe ADHD and dyslexia, Hamden school systems was an awful experience. More students attend this school in Hamden compared to small suburban schools. However, it took them two weeks to decide what they would do with their students. Finally, the school had told parents that they would get a packet of work that their child had to complete. They could go to the school and pick it up or print it at home. Her son went from getting 6 hours a week in specialized services to zero. She said, "I watched my son start to lose everything we had worked on for years in a matter of days." The packet of work that was given was not catered to her son's needs. The entire class got the same packet with no live video instruction. How could her son complete the work? No child is the same, and children were getting the same packet here. Her son had no idea what to do. The mother of Hamden was left to pick up the pieces that her son's school was lacking. She was working from home as a Resource Room teacher. When the mother contacted her son, school addressing her concerns, they said, "They were not worried about her son because he has you," a special education teacher. They dismissed her son and did not give him any of his services while he was home. Her son would cry and did not like remote learning because it was challenging. The mother said she would work with her son between her classes, during lunch, and even when school was over. "He

needed text to read," and the school was not giving him that, so we bought it on his iPad so he would have a reader when I was teaching."

Another Hamden mother said her son had autism. He would receive aid at school throughout the day, and then when the pandemic hit, everything drastically changed. The mother had to have the grandparents watch her son while she was at work. They were not the best with technology, and using the Chromebook was very challenging. She had said that "I am not a trained aid... I feel like I am failing my son." Sadly, some families felt so hopeless during the pandemic because if their children were at school, they would be getting the resources they would usually get without a pandemic. Everything stopped for this family, and the mother felt like she was putting her son at a disadvantage. Having a son with autism, she had said that he was used to schedule and routine. He couldn't fully understand what was going on and why he stayed home for over a year. This Hamden family had WIFI, so they did not have to go to a mobile WIFI hotspot. At the same time, a family in New Britain did not have a computer for their online classes or WIFI. New Britain school systems gave out chrome books to all students. This was the first problem they had to handle, then came the WIFI, whereas suburban families already had these resources, so those schools did not have this challenge. It was already given that these families would have those resources already. The mother of New Britain had to go to a specific neighborhood to get WIFI because many families did not have WIFI in their homes. She could tell her child was regressing, and it all was not the same, but she took it day by day. Across the interviews, parents expressed they were taking the pandemic day by day. They were counting the days down until school was over and hoping the following year would be different. New Britain school systems were a support system for families. I found in my interviews that Hamden School systems and New Britain had to switch children's IEP (Individualized Education

Program) to an ILP (Individualized Learning Plan). Urban school systems knew that children who had IEPs would not make those goals during that academic year, so they changed it. Whereas suburban schools kept IEP testing, IEP meetings for parents were scheduled over the phone.

Woodbridge Parent: (During remote learning)

"My child struggled with her math class because the online layout for her was very challenging. As a result, she could not follow along nor complete any of her math homework."

Hamden Parent: (During remote learning):

"I watched my son start to lose everything we had worked on for years in a matter of days."

It was interesting to see how the school's location played a significant factor for parents of special education children. Suburban schools operated as normal as possible; Special Education Teachers and Speech Pathologists met with their children as if they were at school. To prove they had met with the child, they had to video the session after getting parents' consent. However, it was not the case for Special Education teachers and Speech Pathologists in New Britain School Systems. Some teachers did not even see their children online for their services because they had other responsibilities, no WIFI, or could not reach parents to get approval to meet with them because their phones were out of service. Urban school systems had to act more like a support system because they faced different challenges than suburban schools. Some children had to take care of their siblings because their parents could not be home, and some children had to get jobs to help support the family. They had different priorities to focus on. Many children in New Britain School systems receive a free or reduced lunch for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. New Britain students relied on their school more than just getting an education

and food and emotional support. A teacher at New Britain school systems had gone to the store one day and saw one of her students working. She had asked him, "Why aren't you answering any of my emails and zoom links?" he shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know, but I have to work." Not one parent I interviewed attended a small suburban school that told them that their child had to work or could not be home.

Parent income and their education background play a role in their experiences with their special education child through remote learning. Across the six interviews, every parent had a college degree but one parent. Out of the six interviews, we had 2 of the spouses work in a school system where they knew how to navigate communicating with teachers and administration. Many suburban parents can pay for extra resources. For example, I had one parent tell me that they paid for a subscription to Text to Read so that her son can have a reader when she is working. Many Urban school districts like New Britain, CT had to give their students chrome books to attend their classes online and complete their work. However, another obstacle they faced was that many students did not have WIFI, so they put mobile hotspots in select neighborhoods to get internet.

Depending on what disability your child has depends on how much support they need. Mother of Hamden, CT, has a son who has autism. It was an awful experience for the entire family as we know students who have autism thrive off being on a schedule and routine. Her son did not understand why he was home every day and missed his interactions with his friends and teachers at school. Before the pandemic, her son would receive an AID at school who would accompany him with his work and sit with him in class. He was getting 6-8 hours a week with special education services; however, he got 2-3 hours a week when students got sent home.

Most of the time, it was 2 hours a week. This was an emotional time for the mother because she could not work from home. The grandparents would stay with him, but they were not great with technology. The mother stated, "I could not wait til my child went back to school." She explained that you get so used to having your child go to school and always think it will be there. No one thought a global pandemic would disrupt everyone's life the way it did. She had also said that "As a parent, with a child who has autism, I felt like I was doing my child a disservice every day because the experience was a new challenge every day." Her son would ask her when he could see his friends in gym class? She would have to explain what was going on, and he did not understand. Communicating with her son's school was very challenging because it would take them awhile to answer an email from weeks ago. When you have a child with autism, they need support, and this mother would have to work during the day. So, when she would get home, she would help him out, but he was regressing in all areas. His social groups online were not meeting, and it was challenging to get work done on time because by the time they would get to it, they would have to rush to the next thing.

Whereas mother from Woodbridge, her daughter has a language and learning disability. The mother had described her experience as "it went as good as it could have gone." The mother had expressed that she had taught her child to self-advocate for herself when she needed help. Online learning was difficult for her daughter, but her special education teacher would meet with her for extra help on top of their regular meeting time. She could tell that her daughter was very nervous about online learning because she was so used to seeing her resource room teacher and speech pathologist that she worried she would be struggling. But it is essential to know that her mother could stay home with her. This Woodbridge parent was able to work from home, and

whenever her daughter needed help, she was able to help her as far as resources were provided. Her daughter would use an iPad from the school to help her complete her work. Her daughter's IEP goals did not change because the school was fully operating online, and nothing was being forgotten. The one problem they faced was her daughter's math class online. So, this family purchased an online math program to walk their daughter through the steps of each problem. Then on top of the online math program, her resource room teacher would meet with her on top of their regular schedule time. She was getting 4-6 hours of the week in specialized services and needed extra help.

Parent involvement was always significant, but it became critical when students who received special education services were navigating remote learning. Many of my interviews' parents had expressed that their job allowed them to be home. This allowed them to spend time with their child more, make sure they were doing their work, and help them when needed. However, parents were involved in their child's education across all interviews. No matter what experience they were having with their school, parents were concerned about their child and well-being. Parents saw first-hand how much their child was struggling. One mother had expressed that she had moved from Hamden to Cheshire. The differences were substantial. Cheshire school systems operated like schools in Woodbridge. Everything was online, accommodations and meetings were being met. Those school districts were answering the parents' calls and emails. A few of my interviews consisted of parents that lived in Hamden. Then one parent in New Britain. One family was able to move to a better school district where another family that lived in Hamden was not an option for them to do. Money plays a role in parent involvement. What parent could pay for a subscription of Text to Read or buy a new house in a location, or even have a parent that works in a school system? One mother had said, "I

wanted my son to have a "reader," when I was on a conference call, so he didn't have to wait till I was done. I didn't want to waste any of his education." Parents were open to getting their children extra resources even if they didn't need anything different, just being there and ensuring that work was getting done on time.

“It was very easy for my son to fall through the cracks by not getting the attention from classroom teachers online”

Hamden Parent

“I am not a trained in special education... i’m an accountant”

Hamden/ Cheshire Parent

Discussion/ Conclusion:

We can gather that the pandemic brought a lot of extra stress for families who have a child who receives special education services. Each family and school had its challenges. Parents who have a child receiving special education services when they were sent home for remote learning had to step into new roles as teachers when many of them did not have the training to do so. No one was prepared for this or knew how to navigate remote learning. Parents now must make decisions that they never had to make. This past fall, parents had to decide to send their children back to school because they needed to get the complete services they once had. The hybrid model is not used anymore in school systems because it was too much for the teacher to work with students online and some students in class. Students with special education still face its challenges and will still be a long road ahead, but at least schools and families know what to do if something like this happens again.

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