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THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS SENSEMAKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

SENSEMKAING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lauren Lombardi

This qualitative narrative study design examined the lived experiences of the challenges special education administrators faced in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were comprised of special education administrators from a suburban county in New York state. Half of the participants were from a Title I school district. In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools across the country to close their doors, forcing schools to shift to online learning platforms. This left to sudden shifts in the delivery of instruction, leadership, and support, and created logistical challenges for administrators serving students with disabilities. Through qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and reflective journaling, coding was conducted to discover themes to better understand special education administrators' experiences. The findings from this study supported Karl Weick's sensemaking framework that portrayed the need for an increase in communication, collaboration, and support for staff and student mental health needs. Understanding the lived experiences of special education administrators during this time will help decision making, should another unprecedented challenge occur.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, the main contributors to my educational

success. Throughout my life, they have always been there to love, support, and guide me

to become the person that I am today. Without them, I would not be as successful as I am.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, COVID-19 infections in the United States began to rise, and special education administrators around the world were faced with challenges for which no college or university could have prepared them. On March 18, 2020, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York ordered all schools to close for in person learning. For the first time in their career, special education administrators were responsible for leading their staff from in person to online instruction in tradition public K-12 education. This was difficult for all staff, but it was particularly challenging for special education administrators. They were faced with finding ways to best serve all students equitably, including their most vulnerable students with disabilities.

Special education administrators in New York must follow federal and state laws and regulations when making any decisions. They must ensure that they implement the Americans with Disabilities Act of 2008 (ADA), Individuals with Disabilities Act 2004 (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, Federal Regulations, and New York State Part 200 and 201 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. When conversations began around transitioning to remote learning, special education administrators did not have a regulation to follow exactly as they were written without a pandemic and remote instruction in mind.

On March 12, 2020, the first guidance document was issued by the United States Department of Education that included questions and answers related to providing services to children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 20, 2020, New York State issued their own document, titled *NYSED Guidance to Approved*

Special Education Schools Regarding Novel Coronavirus and Executive Order 202.4. It explained that if a local educational agency (LEA) continues to provide instruction for the general education population during the closure, they must do the same for the special education population. Students with disabilities have different needs, modifications, and accommodations required as per their Individualized Educational Plans (IEP). From March to June 2020, more NYSED guidance documents were issued that specified that state educational agencies (SEAs), LEAs, and schools must ensure equitable access to the continuity of learning and provide IEP services to the greatest extent possible. It stated that a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) might not look the same in these conditions (NYSED, 2020). This allowed for flexibility in implementing the IEP and the provision of special education program and services. In addition, the state reported that IEPs should not be written to accommodate a temporary solution (NYSED, 2020). Special education administrators were faced with the challenge of implementing the IEP, to the greatest extent possible, to a student who is learning fully remotely based on an IEP that was written for a student that is learning in person.

SEAs and LEAs faced new and unexpected challenges in providing meaningful instruction to children, including children with disabilities. Throughout the summer of 2020, special education administrators met to discuss and create safe school reopening plans. The school-reopening guidance offered by the CDC focused on public health considerations, leaving it to educators to determine how to keep students and staff safe while also meeting students' educational needs (CDC, 2020). Challenges and disruptions forced special education administrators and communities to review every facet of education, including the inequities that have stubbornly persisted in the system but have

been exposed during Covid-19 (Bailey, 2020). NYSED required that each district was responsible for their own reopening plan and had to submit it to the state for approval. How each district was going to implement special education services, according to the child's IEP and in the learning environment that each district created, was to be included in the plan.

After the plans for the school year were created and students began returning to school, the federal government changed their guidance on September 28, 2020. This new guidance stated that LEAs and SEAs were responsible for ensuring that FAPE was provided to all children with disabilities, regardless of what primary delivery approach was chosen (USDOE, 2020). The guidance specified if schools limit or do not provide in person instruction due to health and safety concerns, SEAs, LEAs and CSEs are not relieved of their obligation to provide FAPE to each child with a disability under IDEA (USDOE, 2020). This meant that special education administrators no longer had flexibility in implementing the IEP and provision of special education programs and services.

The guidance question and answer documents from both the federal and state governments were low in specificity, which left a lot of questions unanswered and high levels of discretion on how to implement the mandates. However, special education administrators were responsible for making sense of it all and ensuring that students with physical impairments, cognitive or psychiatric challenges were provided with FAPE.

While widespread school closures led to myriad logistical and pedagogical challenges for districts, serving students with disabilities during remote instruction was one of the most demanding aspects of educating during COVID-19 (Jackson & Bowdon,

2020). There were many unknown factors: how to provide quality instruction, how long the closure would take place, how to ensure that IDEA was being followed and how to best meet the unique needs of all students with disabilities and their families. The rapid move to online learning, socialization, and therapies, with little guidance, led to variations across districts. It did not allow anyone time to adequately prepare for the transition. Throughout this time, special education administrators struggled to properly implement the existing special education laws. There are many different interpretations of how to implement IDEA through a remote platform.

Schools in which children from low-income families make up at least 40 percent of enrollment are considered Title I schools (NYSED, 2019). Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA), enacted in 1965, provides support for disadvantaged students in achieving academic excellence. It was designed to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and students from high socioeconomic backgrounds. The Title I program provides supplemental funds to school districts to assist schools with the highest student concentrations of poverty to meet school educational goals (US Legal, 2021). Students in Title I schools face challenges that include housing, transportation, hunger, and poor social, coping and communication skills. Based on the needs of the students, special education administrators working in Title I schools can face heightened challenges as opposed to special education administrators working in high socioeconomic districts.

To begin looking at the overarching question of challenges special education administrators faced in implementing special education federal and state guidance during

the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to turn to research to see what has already been discovered. A survey conducted by the *National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19* (2020) provided an understanding of how challenging it was for districts to meet the needs of students with disabilities during online instruction from the perspectives of district leaders. The results were based on the responses from 744 of the 753 districts that responded to the nationwide survey. Most districts reported that it was more challenging to provide instructional accommodations and related services needed to comply with IDEA during remote instruction (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). There was similarity in responses across high- and low-poverty and rural and urban districts which illustrated that the need to support districts and schools in educating students with disabilities is widespread. In response, districts reported providing specially designed instruction through new mechanisms, including a flipped curriculum, asynchronous therapies, and digital manipulatives.

Schuck and Lamebert (2020) detailed the experiences of two elementary special education teachers as they navigated the transition to emergency remote teaching. The teachers worked in the same school, in a large urban city in the Western U.S. The findings discovered during exploratory interviews, showed three main stages of teaching during this time: making contact, establishing routines, and transitioning to academics. The study described the challenges the special education teachers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as inequity in resources amongst their students, needing to rely on at home support to meaningfully teach students and changes in what it meant to be a teacher while having to teach online.

Journalists across the nation have reported on challenges related to serving students with disabilities. Through news articles, they provided insight into the perspective parents who have been frustrated with a perceived lack of compliance with the IEP for their children with disabilities (Kamanetz, 2020; Stein & Strauss, 2020). Research journals have illustrated the logistical challenges and feelings of hopelessness and exhaustion encountered by school staff serving students with disabilities, explaining how they were unprepared for the overnight switch to reliance on virtual instruction and therapy and how they found it difficult to reach some of the most vulnerable students (Hill, 2020; Tugend, 2020). In a study conducted by the American Institute for Research in the summer of 2020, most districts across the nation reported that it was challenging to provide instructional accommodations and related services needed to comply with IDEA.

Little research has explored and analyzed the experiences that special education administrators had when making sense of the federal and state guidance issued, the challenges they faced and how they addressed these challenges. The current study analyzed and described special education administrators' experiences in implementing IDEA based on the special education federal and state guidance documents issued during the pandemic. Making decisions during a pandemic requires leadership competencies which are equity focused, innovative, legal, and supportive. Analyzing their experiences provided valuable insight into the decision-making process utilized by special education administrators during the pandemic. Their lived experiences told through their stories may guide decisions in the future should another crisis occur.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study was to understand the lived experiences of the challenges special education administrators faced in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. At this stage in the research, the challenges and how they were addressed were described by special education administrators. The narrative approach utilized in this study allowed the researcher to collect stories from the individuals, which shed light on their experiences. These experiences took place during a global pandemic and changed from the start of the pandemic to the present day. The phenomenon being studied can be defined as the sensemaking, challenges, and decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure FAPE while implementing the federal and state guidance.

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

Special education administrators were forced to make sense of the guidance issued from both the federal and state government to apply it to their district programs and student needs. Making sense of the guidance relates to the macro sensemaking perspective that was influenced by the work of psychologist Karl Weick (1995). One of Weick's most notable contributions is his identification of seven properties of sensemaking are making it distinct from interpretation, attribution, and specifically from understanding (Weick 1988, 1993). The seven properties of sensemaking are social, identity, retrospective, focused on and by extracted cues, ongoing, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, and enactive of sensible environments. Each of these seven aspects interact and intertwine as individuals interpret events. Their interpretations become

evident through narratives, written and spoken, which convey the sense they have made of the events (Currie & Brown, 2003).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, special education administrators had more questions than answers, but were still expected to make decisions and develop plans that affected students with disabilities. Weick's (1979) model of organization begins with ecological changes, such as the Mann Gulch fire, that reconfigures the world as we know it. In response to this ambiguity, organizations venture into the unknown to sense new information that can help them better understand their surroundings (Stephens et al., 2020). System disruptions can serve as an opportunity for sense makers to extract cues from the environment to be used for sensemaking. The sensemaking perspective discards the view of decision-makers as rational actors who, based on full information, weigh the pros and cons of each decision. Rather, ambiguities and uncertainties are dealt with through an on-going process where decision-makers attempt to create order and make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking enables leaders to have a better grasp of what is taking place in their environments, thus facilitating other leadership activities such as visioning, relating and inventing (Ancona, 2011). While sense making is quite a complex concept, it can be broken down into three core elements: creating a map of the current situation, exploring the wider system, and acting to change the system to learn more from it. The key to exploring the wider system is to work with others to observe what is going on, to tap different data sources, to collect different types of data, and to keep prior biases from interfering with perceptions. Creating a map or story of the situation adequately represents the current situation that the organization is facing. People learn about

situations by acting in them and then seeing what happens (Weick, 1985). Acting to change the system to learn from it refers to learning about a situation and system through directed action. During the COVID-19 pandemic, special education administrators had to utilize these concepts.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding the experiences special education administrators faced during the COVID-19 pandemic is best demonstrated by the work of Karl Weick's sensemaking and the variables shown in Figure 1. There is lack of literature on the challenges special education administrators faced in interpreting the federal and state guidance documents to implement in their school programs. On March 18, 2020, the governor of New York closed schools for in person learning. This led to a lot of questions unanswered for all school leaders, especially special education administrators. School districts had to ensure that they had to resources for this sudden shift. Special education administrators had to oversee their special education program provided remotely even though there was no training for staff in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable learners. Students who struggle with attention were now expected to learn through a computer; many questioned how this could be done successfully. Guidance was issued from both the federal and state education departments in the spring of 2020 that allowed for flexibility in implementing the provision of programs and services on the IEP to provide FAPE. In the spring of 2020, CSE's met to plan and write IEPs for each student with a disability which would be implemented in September. These IEPs were written based on the flexibility of the guidance issued. In September of 2020, after the IEPs were written and implemented, this flexibility ended. Special education administrators had to ensure FAPE was provided

regardless of the provision of services. Special education administrators were faced with the challenges of making sense the guidance documents issued to ensure that their students' needs were being met by implementing new strategies, increased communication, family involvement and shared collaboration and experiences with colleagues.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
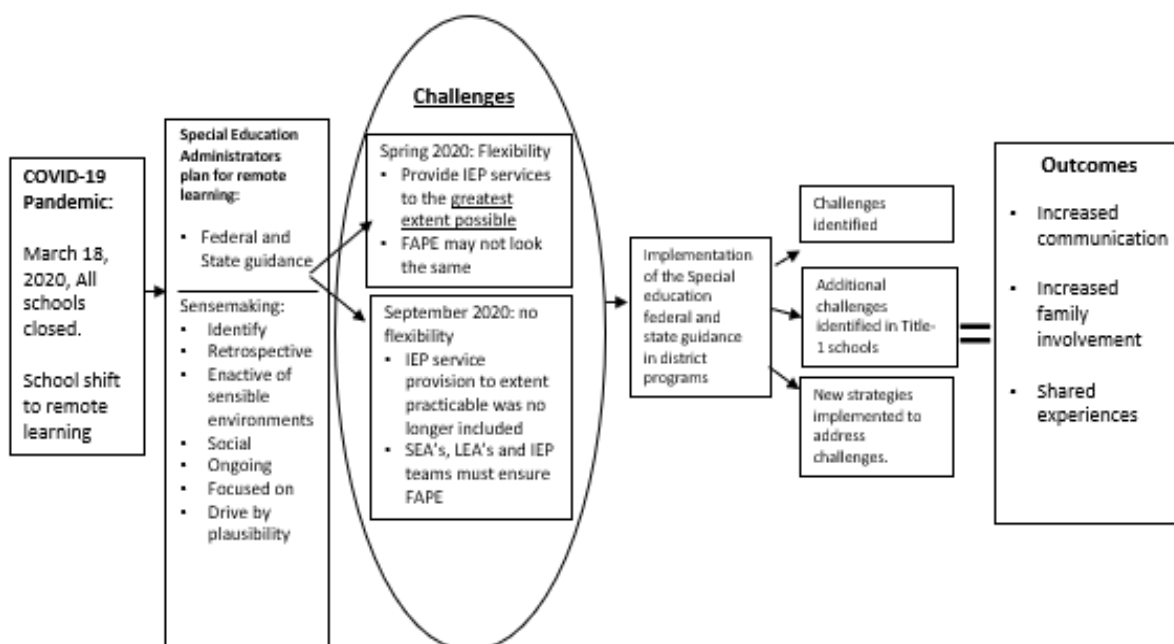
Significance of the Study

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools across the world to close their doors, shifting learning to online platforms including synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. This led to sudden shifts in the delivery of instruction, leadership, and support for staff, students, and families. The sudden change created logistical challenges for administrators serving students with disabilities. The magnitude

of how the COVID-19 global pandemic affected the educational system, particularly students with disabilities makes this an important topic to study.

According to NYSED, students with disabilities were particularly impacted by the closing of schools in spring 2020. New York school districts surveyed by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) in fall 2020 reported a variety of logistical and instructional factors that lessened the quality of special education services during the pandemic, such as shortened school days, lessening the amount of time available for special instruction and the limited capacity of home caregivers to assist in providing specialized instruction and related services.

Research shows that most students with disabilities can meet high standards when provided with meaningful access and participation in the general education curriculum and appropriate, high quality specially designed instruction and support services (NYSED, 2020). An achievement gap has long existed for students with disabilities, and the loss of services during the pandemic threatened to exacerbate this gap. The statewide four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities in 2020 was 62 percent compared to about 89 percent for general education students. On the 2019 Grade 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) New York state assessments, 52 percent of general education students met or exceeded the proficiency standard compared to just 14 percent of students with disabilities, a proficiency gap of 38 percentage points. Similarly, the proficiency gap was 37 percentage points on the 2019 Grade 3-8 Math state assessments (DiNapoli, 2021).

In addition to academic harm, the pandemic has taken a toll on the emotional well-being of students, which can directly impact a student's attendance and overall

ability to complete schoolwork. A May 2020 Parents Together Survey conducted by the US DOE, indicated that students with disabilities may have been facing more mental health challenges than their peers. The survey of more than 1,500 families from around the country indicated that parents of students with disabilities were almost twice as likely to say they were concerned about their child's mental health; 40 percent compared to 23 percent for those without IEPs (DiNapoli, 2021).

The diverse educational needs of students with disabilities are reflected through the continuum of services that are provided in a variety of settings. As school districts are ultimately responsible for the provision of FAPE, the perspectives of special educational administrators detailed in this study will help inform special education administrator's future efforts during unprecedented times.

Disruption of special education services and closing the gap of learning loss from COVID-19 will be an ongoing issue for many years to come since the pandemic is not over. There is very little literature of the experiences and challenges that special education administrators are faced during this time.

Connection to Social Justice

Under ESSA, Title I provides funds to LEAs for the purpose of providing all children significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps among groups of students. Schools that educate children from low-income families which make up at least 40 percent of the enrollment are eligible to use Title I funds to operate school programs to raise the achievement gap. In the present study, the research supported underrepresented groups by

reporting possible inequities that were experienced for special education administrators when faced with challenges in Title I districts and high socioeconomic districts.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Sub Questions

1. What was their sensemaking in addressing the challenges to ensure that FAPE was being implemented?

2. How did the lived experiences of special education administrators in the sensemaking process compare in Title I districts and non- Title I districts?

3. What new practices and/or strategies were implemented in addressing these challenges?

Definition of Terms

COVID-19

COVID-19 is the Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic affecting countries worldwide from December 2019 to present, resulting in the closure of public schools (CDC Works 24/7, 2021)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

FAPE is special education and related services that:

(a) Have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge,

(b) Meet the standards of the State educational agency,

(c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved, and

(d) Are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(d) [20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)] (IDEA, 2004).

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

An IEP is single written document detailing the plan for special education and related services for a student with disabilities. This term is defined by statute and regulation, 20 U.S.C. § 1401(11); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.340-300.350, (IDEA, 2004).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

The IDEA is special education law produced by the United States Department of Education 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 16 and prepare them for employment, further education, and independent living [Sec. 601(d)(1)(A)].

Pandemic

A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease (World Health Organization, 2021)

Special Education

Special education is instruction that is specially designed to meet the exceptional needs of a child with a disability. Special education is individually developed to address a particular child's needs that result from his or her disability and occurs in many different

educational settings depending on the needs of the individual (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

Special Education Administrator

A special education administrator is defined as an individual whose primary responsibility is to oversee the special education program for students with disabilities in a public-school setting and ensure compliance with the regulations set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Special Education Law

Special education law means legislation and case law that enforces the rights to a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities, specifically, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Amendments, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Yell, 1998).

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities are sufficiently evaluated and analyzed with a disabling condition that requires accommodations and modifications to the general curriculum. Related services such as physical therapy, speech pathology, social work, psychological services, and occupational therapy are also included (Praisner, 2003).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 launched the United States into a public health crisis impacting families, schools, and communities. Throughout districts across the country, special education administrators had to ensure that their district programs were providing a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities regardless of the learning platform that was being used. Providing quality instruction and related services from a distance is challenging. Special education administrators were faced with the challenge of making quick adjustments in the effort to service their students and adapt to the federal and state mandates during this time.

This chapter begins by introducing educational sensemaking theory and how it applies to the experiences of special education administrators while implementing the federal and state guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is followed by the Review of Related Literature.

Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking in Educational Policy

To understand the experiences of how special education administrators faced the challenges in fulfilling special education federal and state mandates during the COVID-19, pandemic it is critical to understand how they made sense of the mandates. Sensemaking is the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. It has been defined as the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Education policy researchers have started to use sensemaking theory to expand understandings of policy

implementation beyond motivation and capacity (Coburn, 2005, Spillane, Reiser, and & Reimer, 2002). Sensemaking was used to formulate questions and depict how special education administrators understood the federal and state mandates and addressed the challenges to ensure that FAPE was being implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sensemaking can be described as how a person answers the question of "what's the story?" about their critical noticing of an event, usually one that is extraordinary, unexpected, or disruptive (Weick et al., 2005). Weick (1993) stated that the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create or and make retrospective sense of what occurs. For special education administrators, sensemaking can occur as they anticipate potential barriers in implementing the mandates in their district program.

Sensemaking is the process of making sense of given information. Weick (1995) described it as the process that is: (a) identity, (b) retrospect, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) ongoing, (f) focused on and extracted cues, and (g) drive by plausibility rather than accuracy. The process of sensemaking occurs when an individual or group attempts to understand actions and events that are surprising or confusing (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993).

The seven properties of sensemaking were derived from common elements of definitions found in literature (Laff, 2021). Sensemaking is social; you must take cues from other sense makers on how to make sense. During the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators had to make sense of federal state guidelines and learn from other educators, especially more experienced educators, on how to make sense of this

experience. In looking at the identity property, sensemaking beings with the sense maker, someone making sense. When special education administrators were faced with the challenge of making sense of the guidelines, the emphasis was on their identity as administrators and performing their craft. In this current study, administrators made sense of a lived experience, an experience that has already occurred, looking at it from a retrospective view. According to Weick's properties, the sense maker extracts cues from other people and the environment, incorporating them into their sense. The ongoing property of sensemaking is not centered on time being continuous, but on the interruption of new projects as we look back, how we break up events in our minds, and the emotion we attach to the segments we create to organize meaning (Laff, 2021). People behave pragmatically when sensemaking, favoring plausibility over accuracy when they construct accounts of what is going on (Weick,1995). Enactive of sensible environment means that people in organizations often produce part of the environment that they are faced. According to Weick (1995), a good story is what is necessary in sensemaking, as long as the elements of the story hold together, and a narrative is created that explains what has been experienced by the sense maker.

Numerous researchers of education have studied how the sensemaking theory is used as a tool to understand how school leaders respond to change situations. (Spillane et al., 2002). These studies have focused on how individuals interpret and respond to policy and how contexts shape response to policy (Coburn, 2005; Dorner, 2012).

Spillane et al. (2002) used sensemaking to explain how leaders differently interpret the same information. The researchers developed a cognitive framework to characterize sense-making in the implementation process that is especially relevant for

recent education policy initiatives, such as standards-based reforms that press for tremendous changes in classroom instruction. From a cognitive perspective, a key dimension of the implementation process is whether, and in what ways, implementing agents come to understand their practice, potentially changing their beliefs and attitudes in the process (Spillane et al., 2002). The researchers used sensemaking to convey how differently individuals can interpret the same information which can lead to the implementation of the information in a way that the policy originator did not intend. The authors explained that this relied heavily on the leader's personal backgrounds. In looking at the leader as a sense maker, Spillane et al. emphasized three elements: the individual implementing the policy, the situation in which it occurred as understood by the individual and policy signals (Browning, 2019).

A growing body of research has emphasized the social processes by which teachers adapt and transform policy as they enact it in their classrooms. Yet little attention has been paid to the role of school leaders in this process (Coburn, 2005). Coburn (2001) studied how a teacher's response to policy is shaped by their social network during in-depth case study of one California elementary school. The researcher examined the processes by which teachers construct and reconstruct multiple policy messages about reading instruction in the context of their professional communities. In this study, the researcher followed teachers in one urban Californica elementary school for one year as they sought to improve their reading instruction. In a qualitative case study approach, observations, and in-depth interviewing, supplementing with document analysis was used. There was a focus on teachers in first and second grade because this is the level where reading instruction is the c enter of policy making. Drawing primarily on

institutional and sensemaking theory, a model of collective sensemaking was used that focused on the ways teachers co-construct understandings of policy messages, make decisions about which messages to pursue in their classrooms, and negotiate the technical and practical details of implementation in conversations with their colleagues (Coburn, 2001). Coburn also found that different groups understood the same policy in different ways.

Sensemaking During COVID-19

Stephens et al. (2020) used sensemaking around the COVID-19 pandemic to help process and share some of the academic uncertainties and opportunities relevant to organizational scholars. The research team shared personal and research stories, explored how organizations are responding during the pandemic, and selected ideas for research where the field may have new opportunities. Findings from Stephens et al's study were that: the pandemic is a cascading disaster affecting us in unimaginable ways, the pandemic is likely to permanently change organizations and organizing practices, the pandemic calls for interdisciplinary, long -term research efforts employing creative approach and COVID-19 is a wakeup call, as organizational scholars, to join forces with the community to translate work into practical solutions to make change (Stephens et al., 2020).

Review of Related Literature

There is limited amount of empirical literature directly investing the lived experiences of special education administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is an abundance of research on several topics that, when woven together, create an appropriate base to the study. The following section begins with a brief review

of the history of special education. Next is a review of leadership literature, including leadership in special education from peer reviewed journal articles. Lately, the chapter discusses inequalities in US schools.

Historical Background of IDEA

Instructional leaders are responsible for meeting the needs of individual students as their first obligation, but they also have the responsibility to meet federal, state, and district requirements (Goor, Schwenn & Boyer, 1997). To adhere to the requirements and regulations, special education administrators must connect them to the requirements of IDEA. Understanding the elements and terms of IDEA provides the framework of accountability for delivery of service (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006).

Special Education Rights in Law

The education rights for children with disabilities were largely gained through the efforts of parents and advocacy groups. Many high-profile court cases that influenced legislative mandates in special education. They include the following:

- Brown v. Board of education (1954): Established the right of all children to an equal opportunity for education (Yell, 1998);

- Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Pennsylvania (1972): Class action suit that established the right to free public education for all retarded children (Yell, 1998);

- Mills v. Board of Education (1972): Established the right of every child to an equal opportunity for education; declared that lack of funds was not an acceptable excuse for lack of educational opportunity (Yell, 1998); and

- Timothy W. v. Rochester School District (1989): U.S. Appeals Court upheld the literal interpretation that P.L. 94-142 requires that all handicapped children be provided with a free, appropriate public education. The three-judge Appeals Court overturned the decision of a District Court judge who had ruled that the local school district was not obligated to educate a young boy with multiple and severe disabilities (Yell,1998).

In the early 1970s, there were several federal legislative efforts to improve the education of students with disabilities. The major pieces of legislation to emerge in this decade were Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. These two laws have been major successes for students with disabilities (Yell, Rogers & Lodge Rogers, 2020).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was renamed the Individuals with disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. It was created to ensure that all children with disabilities must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). In 1997, President Clinton stated:

Since the passage of the IDEA, 90% fewer developmentally disabled children are living in institutions—hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities attend public schools and regular classrooms; three times as many disabled young people are enrolled in colleges and universities; twice as many young Americans with disabilities in their twenties are in the American workplace ("Remarks of President Clinton," 1997, p. 24).

IDEA called for a special education process that has three major components: Assessment, Programming, and Evaluation (Yell, 2006). In direct response to the

growing inclusion movement, IDEA then required the IEP team to specify why a decision was made to remove a student with disabilities from the general education classroom (Yell et al., 2004). It also directed that a general education curriculum with supplementary aides and services must be considered before an alternative special education curriculum is instituted (Yell & Shriner, 1997). An amendment to IDEA in 2004 required alternative ways in identify learning disabilities, such as response to intervention (RTI), which is the "practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying child response data to important educational decisions" (NASDSE, 2006).

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

The concept of FAPE is one of the principles of IDEA and reflects the obligation of the local education agency to adapt education to the needs of students with disabilities (Yell, 2006). FAPE, which includes the high-stakes remedies of tuition reimbursement and compensatory education, accounts for most of the litigation under IDEA (Zirkel, 2012). It states that educational services must be provided to the student free of charge at no cost for the parents. To ensure educational benefit for the recommended program and services, it becomes the obligation of the IEP team to ensure that programs are (a) based on student needs; (b) meaningful and contain measurable annual goals; (c) grounded in scientifically based practices; and (d) measured on an ongoing basis to ensure that students make progress (Yell, 2006).

Critiques of IDEA

IDEA has improved special education programs and services for students with disabilities however, there are several weaknesses in the law that have led to inconsistencies while implementing. IDEA mandates that all students have FAPE however, there is no declaration of what "appropriate" means. Another weakness is unequal representation of certain groups. This is shown primarily in the overrepresentation of black and Hispanic students in special education, calling to light a correlation between race/ethnicity, school failure, and placement that IDEA fails to address (Artiles & Trent, 1994). In addition, students of parents from privileged backgrounds are much more likely to pursue due process hearings and actively participate in them, as compared to parents of students in disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more likely to settle or compromise before any legal proceedings take place (Ong-Dean, Daly, & Park, 2011).

Two cases have been heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, which have attempted to define of the "appropriateness" of a FAPE (Balsley, 2018). *Board of Education of the Hendrick-Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982) involved a child who was deaf and relied mostly on lip-reading to learn in school. Her parents wanted the schools to provide an interpreter for her. The argument focused on the word 'appropriate,' a component of FAPE. The U.S. Supreme Court reversed a lower court decision that stated the school system had not provided the appropriate services for the student with disabilities (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). The decision stated that the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was not intended to guarantee a certain level of education, but merely to open the door of access to education for children with

disabilities (Balsley, 2018). The Court interpreted 'appropriate' within the IDEA's FAPE mandate to have a dual meaning. The school district must provide *procedural compliance* with the Act. The substantive standard, according to *Rowley,* was that the eligible child's IEP must be "reasonably calculated to yield educational benefit" (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Zirkel, 2005).

In 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court revisited *Rowley* by answering a similar question in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017). In *Endrew,* the Court analyzed whether the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals was accurate in its interpretation of what constituted an appropriate education (Balsley, 2018). In this case, Endrew's parents contended that the final IEP proposed by the school was not reasonably calculated to enable Endrew to receive educational benefit. The district argued that Endrew's past IEP's demonstrated a pattern of minimal progress. The Court reasoned that to meet the substantive obligation under IDEA, a school district must offer an IEP reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate considering the child's circumstances. The court declined to elaborate on what "appropriate" progress will look like from case-to-case but stated that the "adequacy of a given IEP turns on the unique circumstances of the child for whom it was created (Basley, 2018).

Lastly, vague definitions of various disabilities have led to inconsistencies in how a student can be labeled. For example, according to Part 200 of the Commissioner's regulations in New York State, the definition of having an emotional disturbance (ED) means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a student's educational performance:

a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;

b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;

c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances,

d) a generally pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or

e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

However, federal language specifies that ED must adversely affect educational performance but does not specifically include social learning or behavior as "educational performance. The definition has been criticized as vague and highly subjective and an additional federal clause makes the definition self-contradictory (Launrum & Kauffman, 2021). This can lead to differences between placements and classification amongst districts. These differences can lead to variations under the law and inequity in implementation.

Leadership and Special Education

Special education is considered a law-driven field. It is fraught with various laws, timelines, forms, tests, expenditures, limitations, and complicated procedures, as well as with mandates that can be intimidating and baffling to those overseeing the administration of the same (Wellner, 2012). Special education administrators make recommendations and decisions during the committee of special education (CSE) meetings that impact the lives of children with disabilities and their families. In 1986, Burrello and Zadnick reported that effective special education administrators were: able

to: establish rapport and close working relationships with general education personnel, responded to building-level staff, problems, and concerns, gain support on the fact that equal educational opportunities for special education students required unequal resources; and work towards a system of beliefs grounded in an integrated principle of management, planning and decision making.

In the 1980's, major reform movements on the national level were implemented on the entire educational system because of the global economy that was becoming more competitive (Stile et al., 1986). Teachers and administrators were becoming more responsible and accountable for the academic success of all students, including those with special needs (Guthrie, 1990). Although special education as a field was not an active part of these earliest attempts in general education to define a knowledge base for teacher education, these teacher education reform projects aimed at supporting the pre-service preparation of general education teachers to work with students with disabilities (Blanton et al., 2014). Most of the training that administrators and teachers received regarding special education was from professional interactions, workshops or taking an initiative to become more knowledgeable (Minor, 1992).

Results outlined by Murtadha-Watts and Stoughton (2004) emphasized that many public-school administrators have minimal knowledge about students with disabilities. Integral aspects that were reported missing from administrator programs were the cultural issues that address bias, stereotyping, or predispositions that may arise regarding students with disabilities (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004). Friend (1998) stated that is it the administrative responsibility to develop knowledge and commitment to address all

students with disabilities and understand accountability issues related to the provision of services for students with IEPs.

Students with disabilities were often viewed as bringing numerous issues into the school. They included issues of poverty, discrimination, and behavior. In addition, the enrollment of special education students required additional personnel (Lashley, 2007). Given the issues that were faced and the possibility of legal issues, there was a move to let special education administrators handle day to day operations surrounding students with disabilities and the staff members working with them. Attaining professional status and the establishment of roles and responsibilities was imperative (Crockett et al., 2009). This led to a split between general education administration and special education administration (Lashley, 2007).

The findings of the study by Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) revealed that not only administrators, but students with special education needs believed that administrators need a better understanding of the laws regarding special education and disabilities. A total of 124 participants took part in this mixed method study. Data was collected through a survey instrument and focus group methods. The study determined that more administrator training is required regarding special education law, student disciplinary management, strategies to deal with diversity of issues that would be encountered, and methods or plans to organize the collaboration between general education and special education teachers. According to this study, the importance of cooperation and collaboration among teachers was determined to be integral for a successful special education program (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007).

Instructional administrators are responsible for meeting the needs of individual students as their first obligation, but they also have the responsibility to meet federal, state and district requirements (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) reported that administrators who clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, IDEA, and the instructional challenges that educators who work with students with disabilities face are better prepared to provide appropriate support. Most recent studies reveal that 32% of public-school administrators did not receive any special education training during administrator preparation (Christensen, Robertson, Williamson, & Hunter, 2013). Another study determined that over 50% of administrators disclosed a lack of preparation to manage many matters related to special education (Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015). Both studies determined a need for coursework and training related to the instruction of students with disabilities.

Legal compliance and an understating of special education law are crucial for school districts to meet with the federal and state guidance. Special Education is guided and navigated by the legal system, and according to O'Dell (2003), this field faces the most litigation, which can be convoluted and expensive. Yell (2006) contended that constitutional law, statutory law, regulatory law, and case law prescribe special education authority. Because of this, special education became a result oriented and compliance accountability model. Most of the litigation under IDEA centers on the issues of FAPE, tuition reimbursement, and compensatory education (Zirkel, 2012). Zirkel (2013) also identified that special education advocacy groups and legal commentators dominated the discussions that occurred in Congress and in the courts regarding the obligations of school districts under IDEA. For administrators of special education, this information

must be viewed in the contexts of the school district's role and responsibilities. Famous

court cases include:

- *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954): Established the right of all children to an

  equal opportunity for education (Yell, 2006).

- *Burlington School Committee v. Department of Education* (1985): Established

  that When the educational need of a specific child surpasses those provided in a

  public school, ''compensatory education'' should be considered as a remedy.

  There should be measures in place already to provide for such a facilitation

  should a child require such schooling. The process should be swift and accurate so

  as not to waste valuable time of the child and all others involved.

- *Honig vs. Doe* (1998): Established that school districts cannot indefinitely

  suspended a student for violent and disruptive behavior that was related to his

  disability.

- *Florence County School District Four Vs. Carter* (1993): Established that parents

  have the right to withdraw their child from public school providing an

  inappropriate education under the meaning of IDEA and enroll them in a provide

  school, as long as the private school provides them an "appropriate education".

- *Cedar Rapids Community School District vs. Garret F.* (1998): Established that

  IDEA requires school boards to provide continuous nursing services to disabled

  students who need them during the school day.

Pazey and Cole (2013) validated that over the span of the history of education in

the United States, special education has emerged as one of the most litigious issues that

education administrators face. Special education administrators are the lead advocates to

ensure that students with disabilities have equal educational access and that their rights are protected which is why it is so important that they understand the law. Voltz and Collins (2010) discussed that administrators need training to develop the competencies to effectively fulfill their responsibilities. Boscardin (2007) stated that administering and overseeing special education programs has evolved into a specialized field because of its complicated and cohesive laws and the need for district knowledge base in the disciple in conjunction with professional experiences that are essential to ensure compliance with the law and implementation of best practices.

The skills and competencies needed to be an effective special education administrator have increased, but the fundamentals have not. Jones and Wilkerson (1975) identified the following skills and knowledge to be imperative for a special education administrator to have: finance, organizational techniques, decision making, power structure analysis, leadership qualities, political activities, selection of personnel and community relations. By the 1990's discipline, school violence, statewide assessments and access to the general education curriculum have been added to the list of skills and competencies (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). At the turn of the century, curriculum and instruction, negotiation and conflict resolution, effective intervention, and personal and program evaluation and supervision were added as key areas of knowledge (Meyerowitz, 2014).

Wisland and Vaughan (1964) conducted a study to determine the types of challenges that special education administrators face and if there is a correlation between the challenge and type of program, size of program, and years of experience. They conducted interviews with 180 administrators and supervisors. Results showed that

procuring adequately trained staff was the main area for concern. Similarly, Lashley and Boscardin (2003) stated that a significant challenge for special education administrators is the retention of qualified staff in special education along with recruitment and professional development. Shortage of qualified staff continues to be an issue which results in filling positions with untrained or under qualified personnel (Lashley and Boscardin, 2003).

Leadership During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced leaders to guide their staff to create a remote learning environment however, here was no time to train for it. This created many challenges across all academic settings. In a study conducted by Dumulescu and Mutiu (2021), researchers used an inductive approach to better understand the characteristics and specificities of decisions made by leaders in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 university and faculty leaders in Babes-Bolyai University, Romania. The researchers focused on the academic leaders' decisions and actions during the second part of the 2019-2020 academic year. The thematic analysis revealed three main themes from the participants responses: the leaders personal attributes, unity through decentralization, and opportunities to reinvent the university. Findings indicated that previous leadership experience has been perceived as an effective factor in dealing with the pandemic. In addition, the leadership process was characterized by the fact that the leader set the direction through guidelines (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021). Lastly, after reflection researchers found that the actual practices implemented throughout the university for the

pandemic situation, is perceived as being valuable for application even in non-pandemic conditions (Dumulescu & Mutiu, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Sergiovanni (2007) views the role of the administrator as the instructional leader and transformational leadership as the style which best meets the needs of all stakeholders in the academic process. This approach advocates a shared leadership in which school administrators, along with faculty and staff, participate in decision-making focused on effective curriculum development and instructional practices. Sergiovanni's research shows that transformational leaders seek to inspire and empower members of the organization to focus on a common vision and to take ownership of the change process through a collaborative approach. Yukl (1998) claims a transformational leader articulates the vision in a clear and appealing manner, explains how to attain the vision, acts confidently and optimistically, expresses confidence in the followers, emphasizes values with symbolic actions, leads by example, and empowers followers to achieve the vision.

Block's (2003) study used the multifactor leadership questionnaire and found that supervisors with higher transformational leadership ratings were perceived as having higher levels of mission, adaptability, involvement, and consistency when compared to their counterparts who were rated as more transactional leaders. It was implemented in a Canadian healthcare organization serving approximately 1,000,000 residents with 20,000 employees. A series of focus groups with managers and patient service coordinators were conducted to identify challenges was also used. This study also found that employees who rated supervisors high in transformational leadership have a more positive

perception of their organizational culture. Organizational culture and leadership have an empirical link to each other, and each plays a part in determining organizational effectiveness (Block, 2003)

Bolkan and Goodboy (2009) examined the relationships between transformational leadership in college classrooms, student learning outcomes, student participation, and student perceptions of instructor credibility using a quantitative measure. Participants were 165 undergraduate students enrolled in one of eight introductory or upper-level communication courses at a mid-sized Eastern university. Data was collected through several types of measurement instruments during the last week of class before finals to guarantee that participants were familiar with their instructors' classroom behaviors. Results suggest that all three components of instructional transformational leadership were moderately to strongly associated with all outcome variables (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009). Bolkan and Goodboy found that transformational leadership is positively related to student learning outcomes and perceptions of teacher credibility.

Collaboration

When one thinks about a successful workplace, often the level of productivity and profit of the organization comes to mind. However, these two measures are directly impacted by the collective behaviors and practices of the employees who comprise the workplace (Salas, Kozowshi, & Chen, 2017). Industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology is an area of research which identifies behaviors of individuals within a workplace, understands the reasoning behind those behaviors, predicts outcomes due to the behaviors, and investigates how the behaviors can be changed (Giberson, 2015). The concept of IO psychology can be applied to education. Within special education, it is

important for there to be collaboration between all stakeholders, which includes

administration, teachers, related service providers, agencies, and parents. Historically,

children with disabilities have been separated from their typically developing peers in

self-contained classes (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). Now, students with disabilities are

increasingly being included in their general education classrooms (Mcleskey, Landers,

Williamson & Hoppey, 2012). This change can be attributed to the greater emphasis on

collaborative practices amongst educational staff.

Collaboration in education is seen as a legal mandate, best practice in teacher

practice, and necessary for the inclusion of children with special needs (Hernandez,

2013). The first US federal legislative mandate for students with disabilities began in

1975 with the passage of the Education for All Handicap Children Act (Weintraub &

Kovshi, 2004). This required, for the first time, for American schools to provide a free

appropriate public education for children with special needs (Driesbauch, Blallard, &

Russo, 2001). In addition to this this legal mandate, Cootes (2007) noted that best

practice includes the need for collaboration. Furthermore, Wientraub and Kovshi (2004)

noted that the act required special educators and related service providers to work

together in the implementation of the student's IEP.

It has been documented that teacher collaboration is necessary for improved

student achievement and ongoing school success (DelliCarpini, 2008). In a study by

Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007), results indicated that school

improvement through collaboration had positive effects on student achievement. The data

was drawn from students and teachers in a large urban school district located in the

Midwestern United States. Survey data were drawn from a sample of 47 elementary

schools with 52 teachers and 2,536 fourth grade students. The researchers used hierarchical linear modeling in which survey data were collected two months before students took mandatory state assessments. Naturally occurring differences in teachers' levels of collaboration were measured, and statistical controls for school social context were employed (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007) Through this research, when teachers were given an opportunity to collaborate on issues related to curriculum, instruction, and professional development, they influenced student achievement.

Communication and Collaboration

Weise, Caspe, and Lopez (2006) indicated that effective communication is essential in a school setting and the core of family and school relationships. Effective school communication as viewed in the mission, values, and importance of parental involvement, is the foundation for increased student achievement (Weise et al., 2006). A student's academic success revolves around effective school and parent collaboration and communication.

Belenardo (2001) collected data from nine elementary schools that incorporated a parental involvement program for approximately two years to analyze the process, framework, and organizational components of family involvement programs. Five hundred and ninety-five parents and two hundred twenty-seven teachers participated in this study. The study indicated that parents experienced an increased sense of connectedness and community when the school extended itself by regularly providing student progress reports, information of scheduled school events, volunteer opportunities, and collaboration with community businesses (Belenardo, 2001). Belenardo explained

that a feeling of unity is critical in increasing positive communication between families and schools.

Mulholland and Blecker (2008) studied a preservice teacher's interview with a parent of a child with special needs and a special education teacher as part of a course assignment. The purpose of this study was to increase the opportunities for interaction with families and special education teachers. The reflections of 90 undergraduate students over a 3-year period were examined. From the interviews, preservice teachers found out that most of the teachers only communicated with parents when there was a problem. In addition, they discovered out that most special education teachers wanted general education teachers to receive minimal training in special education to understand their students' needs and collaborate. Interviews with parents found that parents were concerned with family-school partnerships, family-teacher partnerships, and special education -general education partnerships. Most parents complained that general education teachers do not understand their child and therefore are not helpful.

Students with Disabilities

The most common image that society has of children and adults with disabilities is that of someone who is pitiable, physically disabled or has another type of disability that requires the child to need more involved supports, such as mental retardation or autism (Peters, 2004). The reality, however, is that the population with disabilities make up a much more heterogonous group. In fact, the word disability varies in meaning and interpretation from country to country and even within countries (Peters, 2004).

The special education system has given children with disabilities much greater access to public education, established an infrastructure for educating them, helped with

the earlier identification of disabilities, and promoted greater inclusion of these children alongside their nondisabled peers (Aaron & Loprest, 2012). Despite these advances, many problems remain, including the over- and under identification of certain subgroups of students, delays in identifying and serving students, and bureaucratic, regulatory, and financial barriers that complicate the program for everyone involved. In their study, Aaron and Loprest (2012) showed that special education students still lag behind their nondisabled peers in educational achievements, are often held to lower expectations, are less likely to take the full academic curriculum in high school, and are more likely to drop out of school.

Students with Disabilities During COVID-19

During COIVD-19, many students with disabilities were forced to participate in remote instruction in replacement of having in person programs and services. National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2020) recorded that many school districts were not too fond of providing remote instruction because they believed that federal disability laws presented barriers that are too hard to overcome. Despite the indifferences many districts had, school districts must provide FAPE consistent with the need to protect the health and safety of students with disabilities and those individuals' providing education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students (NCLD, 2020). Two court cases, filed on May 19, 2020, related to the impact of COVID-19 on the education of students with disabilities. They both focused on the delivery of FAPE and the central role the IEP played in assuring compliance with the federal law.

Brennan and James v. Wolf, Rivera, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education is a class action lawsuit brought on behalf of verbal and nonverbal students

with autism who use augmentative and alternative communication devices. This case claimed that governor, the secretary of education, and the Pennsylvania Department of education failed to identify special education services as "life sustaining" when the schools closed. In doing so, schools were unable to provide FAPE because of the limitations of remote learning which therefore resulted in the plaintiffs not being provided FAPE. In the second case, *Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) v. Betsy DeVos; United States Department of Education; the Board of Education of the City of Chicago*, the union argued that the Chicago teachers did not have the time to transition to remote learning and review and revise all the IEPs to reflect the changes that were required when the regulations under IDEA or Section 504 were not waived. On June 19. 2020, a federal judge denied CTU's request for a preliminary conjunction against the Chicago Board of Education and Secretary DeVos ruling that the lawsuit faced significant procedural and substantive barriers.

The shift to remote teaching presented challenges to special educators of students with disabilities. A study conducted by Schuck and Lambert (2020), researched the lived experiences of two elementary special education teachers as they navigated the transition to emergency remote teaching. The teachers reported three stages of remote learning with students with disabilities: making contact, establishing routines, and transitioning to academics. They discussed challenges that included inequality of resources, needing to rely on at-home support to make progress, and changes in what it meant to be a teacher while having to teach online. Although they were not in favor of teaching online, the two teachers reported that there was an increase in communication with parents.

Inequalities and Inequities in US Schools

Gaps in technological literacy between educators in well-resourced communities and those with limited resources emerged during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a significant challenge for teachers to pivot their pedagogy and skills to an online format, especially when adapting coursework to meet the various needs of their students.

Title 1

Title I was included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, which was revised to Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged in 2004. Title I includes a schoolwide program that provides federal education funds and resources to upgrade programs and increase student achievement. To quality for Title I, schools must have a minimum of 40% of their population living in poverty (Isernhagen, 2012). Districts are required to devote 20% of their Title I funds to provide students with choice-related supplemental educational services, which can include tutoring or other support services.

Cascio and Reber (2013) explored how the introduction of Title I affected school spending gaps across richer and poorer states using state panel data for the entire country. The researchers obtained state by-school-year–level data on current spending per pupil in average daily attendance for all states in the continental United States from 1953–1954 to 2007–2008. They also analyzed per-pupil spending in percent terms, using its natural log. Using this data, they determined that the Title I program is too small relative to the spending differences associated with poverty to illuminate that gap, as substantial poverty gaps in spending remained.

Evans and Radina (2014) conducted a study in the midwestern region of the United States focusing on the school-family relationship. Evans and Radina sought to understand how discourse in ESEA contributes to the framing of family, school, and community partnerships and how the role of power is addressed within these groups by using a combination of critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. Critical discourse analysis is the attempt to bring social theory and discourse analysis together to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which discourse constructs, becomes constructed, represents, and becomes represented by the social world (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O'Garro, 2005). A corpus linguistics approach offered a quantitative perspective that allowed the researchers to consider a broader sample of school–family compacts in Title I schools (Mautner, 2009). The study involved examining 175 school-family relationships and coding 4,017 experts from them. Data was coded and analyzed using the research software Dedoose. The study resulted in three primary findings. First, the family group largely reinforced school centric family involvement models. Second, the relationships between parents, school staff, and students were primarily transactional in nature, and there was little discussion of partnership work. Third, students were primarily viewed as objects in school, they had very little voice in the school-family relationship. (Evans & Rina, 2014).

Gaps in technological literacy between educators in well-resources communities and those with limited resources emerged during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. One-in-four teens in households with an annual income under $30,000 lack access to a computer at home, compared with just 4% of those in households earning over $75,000, (Auxier and Anderson, 2020). These gaps made it a challenge for teachers to pivot their

pedagogy and skills to an online format, especially when adapting coursework to meet various needs of their students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter includes a restatement of the research questions. It describes the research methods and procedures for the qualitative study including a general description of the setting and participants, trustworthiness of the design, the ethics statement, description of the data analysis, and the researcher's role.

Qualitative research is interpretive inquiry that occurs through interaction and engagement with the participant(s) to understand their unique experiences or problems (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012; Kim, 2016). In addition, qualitative research involves "the collection, analysis and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest…sometimes called naturalistic research, naturalistic inquiry, or field-oriented research" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). The in depth understanding in qualitative research occurs through listening, interpreting, and retelling participants' accounts in a manner that is meaningful (Glesne, 2011). Conducting qualitative research offers the flexibility needed to retell the stories of the participants in a meaningful form by utilizing narratives rather than numbers, thus allowing the freedom to employ a systematic approach to gather empirical evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

A narrative design study was chosen to explore the lived experiences special education administrators faced when implementing regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Narrative research is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies individuals lives and askes one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). In this study, special education administrators

recounted their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since these participants were responsible for implementing federal and state regulations during this time, they offer a meaningful forum to narrate their perceptions to allow the researcher to re-tell the participants' stories through a shared experience of making meaning. Fontanta and Frey (2008) explained that narratives are vehicles that can bring the words and stories of the participants alive, which makes narrative inquiry suitable for this study. The use of narrative inquiry offers the opportunity to focus the participant's perceptions of the challenges, interpretations and decisions made when implementing regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To successfully represent narrative inquiry, the research calls for thick description that is rich and cultivates a rendering of the participant's life that is multi-dimensional (Saldaña, 2009). To accomplish this feat, it is necessary to gather the stories contained in the data and re-story them in a meaningful manner. It is during the re-story process that an informal tie will be established among ideas (Creswell, 2007). This narrative study began with the experiences lived and told stories of the participants. Data was collected through their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences. Themes or primary storylines were identified for further discussion of meaning that the participants and the researcher made (Creswell, 2007) of the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Sub Questions

1. What was their sensemaking in addressing the challenges to ensure that FAPE was being implemented?

2. How did the lived experiences of special education administrators in the sensemaking process compare in Title I districts and non- Title I districts?

3. What new practices and/or strategies were implemented in addressing these challenges?

Methods and Procedures

Setting

Administrators interviewed for this study work in suburban school districts located in a county outside a large metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the U. S. as special education administrators. According to NYSED, the county is made up of 56 school districts, including 199,902 students enrolled in grades K-12 for the 2019-20 school year. Thirty-two percent of these students are considered economically disadvantaged, and thirteen percent are classified as being a student with a disability (NYSED, 2021). The interviews occurred remotely due to the current status of the current COVID-19 pandemic, where it is safer to conduct the interviews remotely rather than

face to face. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, a cloud-based video communications app that allows users to set up virtual videos that can be recorded.

Participants

Purposeful sampling targets a specific group. This is a strategy used in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that that would not be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 2005). Purposeful sampling is used to gather in-depth information to achieve the study's aim (Patton, 2002). This study specifically focused on special education administrators, therefore only administrators of special education were invited to participate. Eight participants, who are all over the age of 21 and who are the special education administrator in their school district, participated in this study. Criterion sampling was the specific method of purposeful sampling used for the participant selection. This involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion if importance (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) explained that in qualitative research the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study. The researcher selected participants based on the following characteristics:

1. The participant must be a special education administrator in a suburban county in New York State.
2. Half of the participants must be from a Title I school district.
3. Half of the participants must work in a district with more than 2000 students; half must work in a district with less than 2000 students.

Maxwell (2013) suggests that the design of a qualitative study has four

components: a research relationship between the researcher and those being researched; site and participant selection; data collection; and data analysis. The researcher must be strategic when developing a relationship with those he/she is researching to maximize the experience and to obtain meaningful data (Stoner, 2010). Building rapport is a key to success in qualitative inquiry (Glesne, 2011).

In the New York State suburban county where the study was conducted, a Directory of Public Schools is issued to all school districts, including contact information for the special education administrator. An email was sent to selected districts requesting their participation. Districts were selected to ensure that there are different student population sizes represented. Four districts that were included have less than 2000 total students enrolled, and four districts have more than 2000 total students enrolled. Student enrollment for each district was found on the New York State data website. In addition, district administrators were selected of those that the researcher is familiar with, that the researcher has met professionally through special education meetings, conferences, and events. Another selection criteria for districts will be Title I districts and non- Title I districts. Title One funding provides support for disadvantaged students in achieving academic excellence. For the purpose of this study, non- Title I districts represented districts that have zero funds listed as allocated funds listed on the government website. Four participating districts represented Title I districts and four represented a non-Tile One district.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher applied to the St. John's University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval that the study design follows the guidelines for conducting ethical

research. Once approval was granted, that data collection began. Permission to conduct the study was obtained by the appropriate leaders serving in the specific county in New York State. Following the participants permission, interviews were scheduled, and the researcher send an email with a private link to the Zoom meeting.

The descriptive narrative method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) involves the collection of data through interviews and document analysis, that sequence events in individuals or group members' lives. Most of the data that was collected in this study was obtained through interviews and participants reflective journaling.

Interviews may be thought of "as the process of getting words to fly" (Glesne, 2011, p. 102). However, interviewing is not as simple as asking questions and getting answers. Interviews have the potential to be ambiguous as written and spoken words can have multiple connotations (Schwandt, 2007). There are various approaches to interviewing. Each approach has specific outcomes in mind. Participants can articulate their experiences using their own words. The information that was revealed from the interviews provided the reader with a better understanding of the individual experiences of special education administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the current study, two interviews were conducted for each participant to ask questions of the participants to elicit the participants' experiences; to gather their stories. The interviews included face to face synchronous video conferencing via Zoom. During the first interview, participants answered questions about their current role, educational background, and experience as a special education administrator pre-COVID. After the first interview, participants were asked to write about their initial thoughts and feelings after the governor closed schools for in person learning. During the second interview,

participants were asked a series of questions based on their experience during COVID up until present day. Narrative data was collected through the participant's stories. It was collected through two open-ended interviews and a journal entry with each participant. The interviews were conducted on a Zoom platform over the course of two days.

According to Morse and Richards (2002), interviews offer the researcher the organization and comfort of preplanned questions, but also the challenge of presenting them to participants in such a way to invite detailed, complex responses. During the interviews, questions were asked about the experiences of special education administrators in implementing the federal and state regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each interviewee was asked guiding questions from the interview protocol. According to Kim (2016), the interviewer asks relevant questions for clarity, but allows for flexibility in the interview process that will most likely make the participants feel their experiences and perspectives are valued. After the first interview, the participant was asked to reflect on their emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic through a journal entry.

Reflective journaling is the process employed by the research to have the participants detail specific experiences aligned to the purpose of the study. To add to the data collected, the participants in this study journaled their initial feeling after schools were closed for in person learning and they had to create their remote learning plans. The eight participants that were interviewed, documented their experience in their natural environment and emailed their response to the researcher. The researcher emphasized that emails were used for their response only and correspondence was deleted after reported findings to honor the participants right to anonymity.

Trustworthiness of the Design

Research is concerned with producing and presenting valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner (Marriam, 2009). In the social sciences, much of the research is to study people's lives, thus, trusting the research results are paramount in the applied sciences (Merriam, 2009). Research needs to be trusted by both those reading and applying their results.

During the data collection process, the researcher continued to promote trustworthiness by conducting two in-depth narrative interviews with each of the selected participants.

Confirmability is when the researcher's interpretations and findings are derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved.

Researchers are encouraged to keep a self-critical account of the research process, including their internal and external dialogue (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In this current study, reflexivity became a self- critical account using two rounds of interviews and journaling.

Research Ethics

Stake (2005) explains that qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict. At the time of the current research study, the researcher had the role of being a special education

administrator. While it is important to bring their personal experiences to the study, it was equally important that the researcher did not bring any assumptions.

The study includes interviews where participants shared personal and revealing information, which is why the researcher strictly followed the guidelines established for complete confidentiality. The initial contact, as well as the subsequent informed consent form, highlighted the importance of confidentiality. The informed consent included permission for audio and video recording. Contact information for participants was obtained from a Directory of Public Schools that the county sends to all district superintendents. Interviews were conducted in a private setting requested by the participant, via Zoom, and codes were used to identify them. Each session was audio and video recorded to collect information from the interviews from each of the participant's personal perspective of the current conditions special education administrators were facing. It is imperative that the researcher looked to understand their lived experiences. The researcher reassured the participants that they could withdraw from the study without any consequences, no personal information was shared, and their privacy and confidentiality was strictly maintained.

All forms and instruments used for the study adhered to St. John's University formal ethical protocol. All data was accessible only to the primary researcher enrolled in St. John's University's Doctor of Education in Instructional Leadership Program. The researcher conducted the study in an overall ethical manner.

Data Analysis Approach

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes

through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. Strauss and Corbin (1990) believe that open coding allows the researcher to analyze qualitative data by examining it, comparing it, and conceptualizing it.

Narrative analysis is a method utilized to better understand the lived experiences of the participants through their stories. Narrative researchers situate individual stories within participants' personal experiences, their culture, and their historical contexts (Creswell, 2013). In this study, qualitative data was collected from special education administrators from the specific county in New York State, who are currently serving as administrators in high socioeconomic or Title I schools. The main sources of data included two open-ended interviews and a reflective writing entry. It is suggested by other researchers that data collection and data analysis should be completed concurrently (Stake, 1995, Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the researcher analyzed the data while it was being collected. The coding of the research was organized to include important similar themes found in the lived experiences between the participant's interviews and document analysis notes based on the research questions. The process of coding included labeling and sorting collected qualitative data (Merriam, 2009).

The live recording was transcribed through the Zoom platform. The researcher reviewed the recordings several times while reading the transcriptions to check for accuracy. Once the interviews were collected, they were analyzed through descriptive coding. This allowed the researcher to examine the data and assign codes as a semantic unit of meaning developed through the coding process, guided by the research purpose and questions. Semantic data shows the relationship in a format that highlights the real

world. After coding using the descriptive coding technique, the researcher used In-vivo coding, which is when the researcher uses codes from the data itself, utilizing the language used by the participants. The researcher scoured the codes that emerged from the data and few meaningful correlations from them. In this process, the researcher established how much each code related to the different demographics of the participant's profile and identified if there was any relationship.

The final step in the data analysis process was representing and visualizing the data. The codes were fully developed by this step and the focus was to communicate the narrative. The data collected in a narrative study must be analyzed for the story the participants have to tell, a chronology of unfolding events, and turning points or epiphanies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This included a coherent outline of the qualitative research, the findings, and the insights of the participants. Charts, tables, and other visuals were woven together for a narrative report.

Only the researcher had access to the data collected. The data was kept in a password protected and locked laptop, which was kept in a locked file cabinet. It was also stored on an external hard drive that was stored in a locked desk and was password protected.

Researcher Role

The research focus for this study was chosen based on experiences the researcher encountered during her professional career. The researcher was faced with the challenge of implementing federal and state regulations based on guidance documents into her district's program. For the researcher, it felt like the guidance documents were issued after a plan was already being put into place. This study included interviews where

participants shared their personal information. As their colleague, the researcher was in a position of influence. The researcher recognized her possible influence on the participants during data collection, called reactivity. The concept of reflexivity was applied to control for researcher reactivity. Reflexivity involves examining one's own judgements and beliefs during the data collection practice.

Since the research is an instrument of data collection, the data in qualitative research is a human instrument instead of inventories, surveys, or questionnaires (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Since it is a human instrument, researchers sometimes may have involved their biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences to the research (Greenbank, 2003).

The researcher was a special education administrator during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study included interviews and journals where participants shared personal and revealing information about themselves as an administrator with the researcher. It was important that the researcher looked to understand their stories and experiences. To mitigate personal bias, the researcher focused on rich and thick description with the participants agreeing that the results were accurate.

Conclusion

This chapter provided details on the methods that were used to collect data from special education administrators. The narrative approach in this investigation provided insight into the lived experiences of special education administrators while implementing regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participant's stories allowed the researcher, to understand how they made sense and faced the challenges of implementing the special education regulations in their district's programs. The following chapter will

present the findings from the data analysis to create an understanding of the special

education administrators lived experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In this narrative study, eight special education administrators in a suburban county of New York State shared their sense-making experiences in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories they shared provided personal experiences as perceived by each administrator.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight related to the central research question: What were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic? The chapter includes rich, thick descriptions (Patton, 2015) of the case as it relates to data analysis and key constructs for answering the central and sub research questions. In this chapter, the researcher highlighted the data analysis measures in relation to the narrative interpretations that the researcher drew from the data. The narrative inquiry framework focused on each participant's data in connection with the various themes: (a) mixed emotions; (b) increased communication/collaboration; (c) family involvement; (d) challenges; (e) sense making. The sensemaking framework helped the researcher to understand connections between themes and stories as they related to the participant's experiences and perspectives.

Findings

Participants

The study participants are comprised of special education administrators in a suburban county of New York state; half of the administrators were from a Title I school district. For this study, the participants are referred to by a pseudonym.

Andrea. Andrea is a special education administrator in a K-12 non- Title I school district with more than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Andrea was a school psychologist. She has been in education for 15 years, with all these years in special education. Andrea explained that she was encouraged to go into administration by her former Principal from a different school district. During that time, she was in the role as a school psychologist, but working in the capacity of a CSE chairperson. She stated that during this time, she learned what some of the unspoken rules of special education are. It came with experience that she learned what she could and could not do when making decisions that would impact students. Currently, Andrea describes herself as a micromanager. In her current role, she oversees all special education staff, CPSE, CSE, maintains the special education budget, mental health curriculum and resources. Andrea explained that humor and the amazing team she works with is getting her through this challenging time. She explained how throughout all her experiences, she has always worked with a very supportive administrative team. Her current team includes an assistant director, with whom she has a very good relationship.

Barbara. Barbara is a special education administrator in a K-12 non- Title I school district with more than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Barbara was a special education teacher and a special education chairperson in a 7-12 school district for seventeen years. She left that district for a director position in a small K-6 school district for three and a half years. Barbara is in her current role as a director for two years. Barbara explained that she left the classroom as a teacher because she saw the opportunity at the time. She had gotten her administrative degree when she was very young and felt that she was ready to take the next step. She

reported that she learned the ropes quickly. Barbara describes her leadership style as collaborative, with the mentality that the student always comes first. She explained that it is important to build trust with others and be willing to jump in and get your hands dirty. Barbara explained that this was challenging for her in her current role because she started in this district right before the pandemic began. Currently, she oversees all special education programs and services for public and non-public schools in the district. Barbara explained that a sense of humor and taking time for herself is getting her through this challenging time.

Cliff. Cliff is a special education administrator in a K-6 non- Title I school district with less than 2000 students. Prior to becoming special education administrator, Cliff was a teaching assistant, a teacher, and an assistant principal.. Cliff has been education for twenty years, with ten years in his current position. He leads by example; he would not ask his staff to do something that he would not do himself. He explained that he leads in a way that takes values, information, and expertise of other people. He stated that he does not always have the answers so allowing other people to lead with him has gone a long way. Cliff was encouraged to apply for this position, where he oversees CPSE, CSE, special education staff, nurses, is the homeless liaison, and supervises the ENL program. Since he works in a small district, Cliff does not have an assistant to help him with these tasks. Pre-COVID, processional development was a challenge for him. He always wante4d to make sure that the teachers had all skills necessary to support their students, but every teacher was in a different place. Cliff reported that the morale in his district pre COVID was positive; it fluctuated based on things that were going on in the building or

student performance but overall, it was positive. Cliff explained how not getting upset with the little things is getting him through this challenging time.

Damian. Damian is a special education administrator in a K-6 non-Title I school district with less than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Damian was a school psychologist in a middle school, with nineteen years of experience in special education. As a psychologist, he had many leadership roles, which inspired him to become an administrator. Damian reported that his experience working in a middle school has helped him to understand where his students in his current district should be before aging out of his district. Damian describes his leadership style as collaborative. He knows that he is not an expert in everything, so he relies heavily on the input of teachers and his colleagues. Damian oversees all special education staff, chairs CSE meetings, maintains the special education budget, nursing, and the ENL program. Damian reported that pre-COVID, the morale in his district was good; there were outlies here and there but for the most part everyone was on the same page believing in the cause. Damian explained how working with colleagues and staff and their areas of expertise assisted him with making decisions during this challenging time.

Earl. Earl is a special education administrator in a 7-12 Title I school district with more than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Earl was a school psychologist, with twenty-seven years of experience in special education. He explained that he went into administration for a career advancement. Earl describes his leadership style as collegial and informal. He reported that he likes to tell his staff that they don't work for him, they work with him. Earl oversees the entire special education program and all related service providers employed by the district. He reported that

being flexible is essential in leading a successful special education program. Earl explained how family and peer support is helping him get through this challenging time. He explained that pre-COVID, the morale in his district was pretty good; the teachers enjoyed working with the students and were very motivated.

Fiona. Fiona is a special education administrator in a K-12 Title I school district with more than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, she was a school psychologist, with thirty years of experience in special education. Fiona applied for an administrative position because she got to a point in her career where she felt like she could impact the system more than just from her seat on the bench as a psychologist. Fiona describes her leadership style as non-hierarchical; she is very hands on and inclusive. Fiona supervises the special education program in her district however, she also has the role of the district psychologist. Fiona explained that practicing what she preaches is helping her get through this challenging time. She explained how she is good at telling other people how to address their mental health needs, but she must take time to do it for herself as well. Pre-COVID, one of her biggest challenges was making sure she had an appropriate program with enough support for staff and children for her most disabled learners. She explained that it was a struggle to address the student's behaviors, support the staff, work with the teacher's union, and have enough resources to make a change.

Gloria. Gloria is a special education administrator in a K-12 Title I school district with less than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Gloria was a school psychologist, with twenty-four years of experience in special education. She was interested in studying administration when a local university started a cohort in her

district. Gloria reported that she is always willing to hear everybody else's ideas; she likes for everyone to be involved in the decision-making process. However, sometimes she must be the one to make the decision. Gloria oversees special education and the 504 program within the district, including special education teachers and related service providers. She explained that pre-COVID, there was a lot of turn over in the administrative staff. Gloria explained how support from her colleges is helping her get through this challenging time.

      Harper. Harper is a special education administrator in a K-6 Title I district with less than 2000 students. Prior to becoming a special education administrator, Harper was a school psychologist, with over twenty years of experience in special education. She describes her leadership style as a combination of collaborative and servant leadership. She likes to bring people together to have a shared vision and purpose but also sees her role as a resource. Harper explained that when a person works in a small district, there is not that many layers of administrative support, so within her role she does a lot. Harper explained that pre-COVID the morale in her district was overall positive. Her district always values staff feedback through surveys at the beginning and end of the year and the majority was very positive. She explained that by having a long-term vision is helping her not to become overwhelmed during this challenging time.

Table 1

Description of Participants

Participant	District size	Socioeconomic	Background	Grades	Years of Experience
Andrea	>2000	Non- Title I	Psychologist	K-12	15
Barbara	>2000	Non- Title I	Teacher	K-12	22
Cliff	<2000	Non- Title I	Teacher	K-6	20
Damian	<2000	Non- Title I	Psychologist	K-6	19
Earl	>2000	Title I	Psychologist	7-12	27
Fiona	>2000	Title I	Psychologist	K-12	30
Gloria	<2000	Title I	Psychologist	K-12	24
Harper	<2000	Title I	Psychologist	K-6	26

Findings for the Central Research Question

What were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The central research question allowed participants to fully explain their experiences from the start of the pandemic. Participants were asked to describe their immediate reaction from when the governor closed schools and shifted to remote learning to the present day, as the pandemic is still occurring. Using Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry (2000), the researcher viewed the experiences through temporality. According to Clandinin (2006), temporality is commonly referred to as time and

researchers must appreciate that events are ever changing. Each experience and relationship is linked to the past, present, and future, as the past will account for the way to act in the present moment, which can then inform, guide, and impact the way to act in the future. Throughout the interviews, participants explained how their experiences changed over time.

Experience 1: Schools closed for in Person Instruction

On March 19, 2020, all New York schools were closed for in person instruction. Experience 1 explains what that looked and felt like from the lens of a special education administrator.

Mixed Emotions. Findings suggest that special education administrators had a sense of relief but also a great deal of uncertainty when schools closed for in person instruction. Earl described this as:

My immediate thoughts and feelings were that this was a good and necessary. It was a temporary step to help alleviate a health crisis. However, I was troubled by the abruptness of the decision and the lack of explanation and planning prior to the announcement.

Harper added:

My immediate feeling was relief based on the realization of the situation unfolding and being able to stay safe and try to shelter my family. I was also feeling some apprehension because how I perform my work was about to dramatically change.

Participants explained that panic and the sense of uncertainty led to anxiety of what was going to be their next steps. Barbara described the initial panic that ran through her head after first hearing the order:

> It was the longest day of my life; I was trying to figure out where to send staff, what I was sending out to parents, how to meet the needs of the kids, what all of this was going to look like. I felt like I was by myself.

> In the reflective journal, participants explained how these feelings were short term. In a short period of time, committees were formed throughout their districts that alleviated these mixed emotions and helped them feel supported.

Table 2

Participants' Feelings and Reactions

Participant	Initial feeling	Initial reaction
Andrea	Relief	Problem solve with leadership team
Barbara	Stressed	Worked closely with all stakeholders
Cliff	Confused	Met with administrative team
Damian	Fear, anxiety, panic	Met with central administration
Earl	Relief, troubled	Met with team
Fiona	Relief, fear	Formed committees
Gloria	Overwhelmed, powerless	Met with staff
Harper	Relief, apprehension	Met with central administration

Morale. Data showed that all participants explained how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the morale in their school district. During the first interview, participants explained that the morale in their district was overall positive. When schools were closed for in-person learning, there were a lot of unknowns, which caused a lot of frustration and lowered the morale in each district. Damian explained what this initially looked like:

> When COVID first happened, it killed the morale. We were trying to get virtual learning started and staff didn't like that. It was new, no one likes to change. There were many challenges and fears of the unknown.

In addition, Fiona explained how the lack of training in technology when shifting to a remote platform damaged the morale in her district:

> Staff were extremely frustrated. Everyone was trying to figure out what remote platform they were going to use, with very little knowledge and training. Administrators now how to become experts in something that they knew little about. Staff state that if they needed training and step by step instructions, students with disabilities were going to struggle.

> Throughout the interviews, all participants explained how the school closure effected the morale in a negative way for staff, parents, and students. Unfortunately, there were so many unknowns that this caused additional challenges.

Challenges. Participants explained that districts outside of this metropolitan area were already closing throughout the state, so they felt the state-wide closure would result in more guidance. However, there were a lot of questions that were left unanswered, with little time to process. Special education administrators had no idea what was going on or

what the impact of COVID-19 would be. Barbara explained the challenges she was initially faced with:

> Once we got to the point that were knew we were not coming back, we had to shift what we were going to do. It was a mess, we had to discuss how much synchronous instruction we were expecting our teachers to deliver. Of course, this looked different for special education teachers. We were trying to make it equitable for both the staff and the students. But because of the needs of our students, there was no way for it to be equitable.

Fiona shared similar concerns that her staff expressed regarding equity:

> My special education teachers and providers expressed that they had to put more time in than general education teachers because they needed to provide more one-to-one instruction; they cannot do group work and meet the needs of their students virtually. Special education teachers that worked in ICT classrooms expressed that after their general education teacher counterpart was able to log off, they had to provide small group or 1:1 instruction.

Gloria explained how the little guidance and experience in this situation caused her more anxiety:

> I went to a meeting with colleagues from other districts and my anxiety was so high from it that I never went to another meeting again. I felt like everyone was giving their opinions, as opposed to giving facts on how to do something. But in reality, no one had the facts. No one ever went through something like this before.

When schools closed for in person instruction, districts had to shift their instruction to asynchronous and synchronous learning platforms. This created challenges

in meeting student's needs. Cliff explained how the remote platform effected his student's services:

> There were a lot of areas where we were out of compliance. Not because we didn't try, but because some things were just not feasible on a remote platform. For example, to provide occupational and physical therapy over a remote platform, yeah, my providers can provide work, but is the child really benefiting from it?

Harper explained the challenge that teachers of special classes faced. According to New York State law, students in a special class can range in age of 36 months. Therefore, they could have a three-grade range of curriculum to follow.

> Our special education teachers were setting up Google Meets, in which they had to train themselves, classroom aides, and parents on how to use. In these classes, the students are very low functioning. It was very difficult for them to meet as a group, not only because of the functioning level, but because they are multiple grades in the class. They really needed to balance between setting up these Google Meets, as well as individual meets. They had to utilize their classroom aides to assist with this, otherwise they would be working with students all hours of the day. There was a big learning curve in trying to implement a fully remote program to our most disabled students. For some of these students, by the time they acclimated to the new platform, they were retuning for in person summer program, but staff still had to implement the IEP and monitor the student's goals.
>
> Participants explained how these challenges continued until the end of the school

year in June. Usually, they are looking forward to summer vacation however, this year

they would be faced with additional challenges to the ones that they were not able to overcome.

Experience 2: Districts Reopen for In Person Instruction

During the Summer of 2020, reopening guidance was issued by New York State, the federal government, and the CDC. Districts were tasked with forming committees to write their reopening plan and submit it to the state for approval. In September of 2020, districts were to reopen for in person instruction based on the plan that was created.

Change in Morale. Participants in this study expressed how reopening for in person instruction was both positive and negative for the morale of the district. Fiona explained how special education teachers were more worried when they returned to in person instruction since they could not socially distance from their students:

> Our building administrator does not have a special education background, and unless you have lived it, you really don't understand the challenge. The teachers worried about going home to their children and older parents. They were frustrated that they had to be so close with students and that the administrator did not understand their feelings.   They were all just holding on as best they could, but it really damaged the morale.

Damian shared a different experience. In his district, the morale went up:

> At the start of the 2020-21 school year, everyone was on board and wanted to be back. The morale went up, not to where it was pre-COVID, but better than it was at the start of the pandemic. Staff was happy that we were open again and they could see their students and meet with their colleagues. There were many

changes to what it was pre-COVID but, it almost felt like it was getting back to normal. This really help the morale go back up.

All participants explained that the morale in their district was positive pre-COVID however, based on their reopening plan and how supported staff felt, this fluctuated throughout districts during this time.

New Challenges. After school opened in September 2020, additional guidance document was issued from New York state that ended the flexibility in implementing the IEP. Because all districts opened every day for students with IEPs, this only caused an issue for students with IEPs that requested remote learning. Cliff explained that this caused a challenge for both special instruction and related services:

We had thirty students with IEPs in the district that opted for remote instruction. We had to have individual conversations with those parents as to what we could deliver virtually and what was appropriate. For example, physical therapy is almost impossible through a remote platform. Our providers were able to provide work, but could they really assess whether a student could safely walk down the stairs or navigate the playground equipment safely. Some of the goals on the IEP simply could not be assessed even though we were given this new guidance that we had to.

Learning loss was another challenge that all administrators shared. Participants expressed how students returned to in person instruction on different levels, and lower levels than previous years. Gloria explained that the learning loss is being seen as early as kindergarten, which caused a challenge in placement when the child was transitioning from remote pre-kindergarten to person learning kindergarten.

There was a concern with the incoming kindergartener class this year. We had to do screenings and observations virtually while they were in Pre-K and place them into a kindergarten class for September; it was hard to figure out their needs. We questioned ourselves a lot this year on whether we did it right and really understood the children. Our recommendations were based on pre-school evaluations that were done virtually and teacher's report based on a remote program. Four- and five-year old's act a lot differently at home and when they have never experienced a school setting before. We had to make a lot of changes this fall and move children to more resistive placements. Children needed to be acclimated to school. They needed to learn that there were expectations and rules, we had to teach them how to act with peers, in the bathroom, how to share; all skills that they usually come in with from pre-k.

Participants explained that these new challenges were not anticipated when they created their reopening plan. Throughout this time, they continued to meet with their committees to address these challenges.

Experience 3: Present Day

Throughout the interviews, participants explained how the COVID-19 pandemic still has a huge impact on their district. All students have returned for in-person instruction however, they are still required to wear masks. Participants explained that they thought this year would feel like it was "back to normal". However, the Omicron variant of COVID-19 retuned the infection rate to its highest levels since the start of the pandemic.

A Wave of Emotions. Participants all explained how the morale in their district for the 2021-2022 school year has been in waves and varies depending on who you are speaking to. Cliff explained how this is in his district:

> This year, COVID is back on everyone's mind, and everyone is concerned about safety. Currently, with the new omicron variant, I would say morale is not great right now. Our staff is frustrated, between student and staff quarantines and the rules changing, nothing is stable.

In another district, Earl discussed how it is difficult to sustain working with low morale:

> The challenge is right now, how can we sustain what we are doing? We are two years in, and it really does not feel like it is getting better, if anything it feels like it is getting worse. We are spending a lot of time right now working on staff morale and their social emotional needs to try to keep their spirits up. It is a lot. They are seeing their colleagues constantly quarantining at this point, and then coming back; some are asymptomatic working from home. This gets frustrating. It takes a lot of balancing. I think that there are permanent changes within

Damian explained how the pandemic is still occurring. The changes that it has brought has been affecting the morale in the district. He expressed that it is affecting his district like a wave:

> At first, it was very negative, there so much unknown. Just when we thought things were getting back to normal, another variant was announced. This year, it feels worse than last. I think people are just done with it; they want it to be back to normal. As I look back and reflect, my staff has come such a long way in what they can do with our students academically. My mental health providers have

provided supports for more students now than we ever imagined. On some days, my staff looks defeated or burnt out. It is my job to keep that morale up; to keep encouraging them and acknowledging what an amazing job they are doing. It is something that is changing day by day.

Participants in this study explained how they are trying to change the morale in their district to a positive one. Andrea explained how she tried to change the morale in her district:

> My director and I met with every special education staff member in each building to talk about how we know that this has been a struggle and how this has been hard. We wanted to let them know that they were not alone, everybody is feeling it and that there are supports and things in place for their mental health. We gave them suggestions for self-care, but we also talked about how hard it is to engage in those things. The feedback was incredible; it was very positive. All we did was meet with them and acknowledge that everyone thinks that this is a really bad time, we were ready for it to be over, but no one really had the answers and that was okay because we were in it together. I think it made them feel better knowing that everyone was tired, everyone was frustrated, and everyone feels like there's a lot of pressure on them to fix something that they didn't haven answer to on how to fix.

Gloria explained how they felt they needed to bring the morale up amongst the administrator before they could with their staff:

> I started a chain letter with the administrators, unbeknownst to them. I wrote a letter to one of our administrators and I said, this is a chain letter, not that you are

going to have bad luck if you don't continue, but I hope that once you see it you will continue it. The letter stated how I wanted to express my appreciation for them. Then that person wrote it to the next person, and then the next. This wasn't my intention, but they were including everyone on the letters, so it was nice reading everyone's appreciation for one another. It was cool, you didn't know about it until you got it, and someone was expressing their appreciation for you.

All eight participants expressed how the pandemic is still occurring. All districts have fully returned to in person instruction however, besides to being in person, not much feels like it is "back to normal."

Unknown Challenges. Participants in this study shared that they are still facing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include a shortage in staffing and learning loss in students. Earl explained how this looks in his district regarding related services, which are IEP mandated:

We are having a really hard time staffing occupational and physical therapists for our older students. So, our teachers and other providers are working on these goals. Our student's needs are still being met, just not in the same way that they are listed on the IEP. That is our reality, to do the best we could for our students.

Earl explained how offering a remote platform during the school closure is still having a negative impact on his students:

Unfortunately, we are still seeing the effects of this. School refusal is at an all-time high right now. I think some students got used to the home schedule and now being expected to be on a schedule again is very challenging for them.

Andrea explained that learning loss is not only due to what happened in the beginning of the pandemic, but is still currently occurring:

> We have a significant number of students that are behind academically and social emotionally. I don't have the answers on how to catch up huge groups of students that are behind, either because of lack of instruction, because they were remote, or because of any kind of trauma they experienced during this time. Nothing was or even now is consistent. As of today, we are still quarantining students. They are out of school significantly more than they ever were before and that is demonstrated in the amount of learning that is happening.

Fiona explained the challenge of in-person learning for special education teachers:

> As a special education teacher working with low-functioning students, social distancing did not exist. Our staff needed to provide physical prompts to students, they need to be in close proximity with some students that were not able to tolerate wearing a mask for the full day. If a student is having a behavioral episode, they might need to implement physical assistance. So, the burden was greater than in general education; there was an added layer of responsibility. There was no five feet distance between the staff and students.

Outcomes

All eight participants expressed that parent involvement was critical to their child's success during remote instruction. Participants expressed how there were pros and cons during this time. Throughout the districts it looked different however, parent involvement was needed for all students K-12.

Positive Family Involvement. Cliff explained how important parent involvement was in his district for the success of his students:

> We were very fortunate to have a high level of parent involvement. There were students that would literally be sitting on their laps; this was both positive and negative. Some parents acted like supervisors when others just made sure their child was on tasks. This was something that our teachers needed to overcome. At first, they were very uncomfortable with it, not because they were doing anything wrong, but it almost felt like they were being observed.

Fiona explained how an increase of parent involvement helped the family really understand their child's needs better:

> For our students with severe to moderate developmental disabilities, our parents really needed to be with their child for them to be able to attempt any kind of remote instruction. My teachers did share with me that this enabled them to have more contact with parents. Parents were able to see firsthand how their child is instructed, as well as seeing different behavioral needs. Parents had to serve as their child's aide and implement strategies that we use in the classroom. They had to implement a behavior plan or constantly promote their attention. At first, there was a big learning curve. First, we had to instruct the parents on how to assist them, then we had to start working with the students. This wasn't ideal in anyway, but parents were now able to carry over some of these strategies in the home.

Negative Family Involvement. Barbara explained how the increase of parent involvement was not necessarily a positive thing:

There was a lot more parent involvement then what the staff would have liked on the elementary level. In some cases, the parents were doing the participation and the staff had to stop them. Teachers had to remind parents that they could not be learning for their child.

Earl explained how parent involvement looked very different on the high school level:

There was very little supervision. This became an issue for our students. They did not want to log in at 7:30 in the morning to engage with staff, they would email them at eight, nine o'clock at night. Parents would express that they were not home to make sure their child was awake and logging in. The explanation I got often was, he is sixteen, I must go to work.

In each of the eight districts, participants expressed that parent involvement ran the gamut. There were parents that were home and could support their children and then there were parents that had to go to work. A few of the participants expressed that the amount of parent involvement changed over time. In the beginning it was very strong but as time went on, they could no longer manage the expectations of what was occurring.

Increased Mental Health Needs. Participants explained that it was not just academic needs that regressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but student's social emotional needs regressed as well. Fiona expressed this as her biggest challenge:

We are seeing a lot of students that are having interpersonal conflicts, feeling less than, and not feeling good anymore. This is an ongoing problem that I am not sure it is something that we are going to recover from so quickly. One of my biggest concerns is when you look at the middle school population; it's a really glaring example of kids who in eighth grade are typically very put together and ready to

move on to the high school experience with a level of maturity, for the most part.

Now, my eighth graders are really like sixth graders. They don't know how to get

along, they are name calling and doing all those things that you did when you are

transitioning into sixth grade, not ninth.

Barbara explained how the ongoing pandemic is causing an increase in the mental health

needs of their students:

Students, especially on the secondary level, must be assessed regularly due to

their mental health needs. There is more stress on students and families, due to the

ongoing pandemic. The students are in need of increased counseling and outside

supports. I have never seen so many cases of school refusal. Staff are making

many more referrals to hospitals, outside resources; they are working with

students who are making threats to hurt themselves. I went to a training recently

that stated there is a 50% increase of suicide attempts for adolescent girls since

the pandemic began. My district is working on increasing resources to address

the student needs and provide more supports

All participants explained how the mental health needs of students, staff, and

parents have been their biggest challenge throughout this difficult time. They all reported

that they do not feel like it is getting better even with outside supports.

Increased Communication/ Collaboration. All participants explained that

committees were formed within their districts that included central office administrators,

building administrators, and teachers to discuss how they were going to initially move

forward with remote instruction. Participants explained that they thought it would only be

for a couple of weeks, so they were planning for a short term. Earl explained how this was done:

> When guidance was issued, we met as an administrative team to review it. We went over it and had a lot of cabinet meetings to try to piece it together, set up a plan, and roll it out. We tried to piece it together as a group, some of it was more successful than others.

Prior to reopening, all participants explained that their districts created committees to create a reopening plan. This committee consisted of district and building administrators, teachers, providers, nursers, community members, the board of education, and students. Harper explained how this committee was ongoing; they met various times throughout the summer:

> The superintendent had different benchmarks of times where the committee would come together. We would review the guidance document, talking to each other, including parents in on how we were going to roll things out. I think this was a positive thing with the community. The PTA members were involved; they were able to help communicate why we were doing what we were doing. We made decisions based upon that and gave a survey out to the community.

> Throughout all interviews and journal entries, all participants explained how

working collaboratively with staff was critical during this time. They explained how they relied on the expertise of others not only during COVID, but pre COVID as well.

Change in Job Responsibilities. Administrators in districts with less than 2000 students explained that since they are in a small district, they are very involved in all

departments. Damian explained how his role and responsibilities changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> Because of COVID, I was involved a lot more with ENL. Pre-COVID, I knew the names of all students with disabilities. Now I know all ENL students as well. I am really involved with anything related to COVID. My superintendent called me the COVID expert. COVID gave me more a global view district wide.

Cliff similarly explained how he also had to take on other roles:

> You take roles on just to get things done. We went back and forth so many times about what kind of furniture to order for the students so they can all return safely. Since I had a good relationship with a furniture guy, I ordered everything for the district. I ordered electrostatic sprayers, masks, furniture. None of this had anything to do with special education. But I just did it, it needed to get done so why not.

> Due to the new tasks that COVID created, special education administrators had to create time to get them done, in addition to managing their special education department.

Findings for Sub Research Question 1

What was their sense making in addressing the challenges to ensure that FAPE was being implemented?

The framework for this study is based on Karl Weick's idea of sensemaking, which includes seven characteristics. Participants' responses demonstrated a connection between Karl Weick's sense making theory. The eight participants in this study shared their collaborative process to address the uncertain event of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their interpretations became evident through the narratives they shared.

Sensemaking During COVID-19 is Retrospective

Sensemaking directly involves developing meaning to actions or events that have previously occurred. In this study, the sensemaking characteristic retrospective occurred when special education administrators extracted cues from their environment and used hindsight to implement the federal and state guidelines and ensure that FAPE was being implemented in their remote and reopening plans.

After schools were closed for in person instruction in March of 2020, the general education programs did not have the opportunity to open back to in person instruction until September of 2020. However, some special education programs opened for the extended school year (ESY) program in the summer 2020. This allowed special education administrators to understand what strategies would work for the fall of 2020 and which ones they needed to change. By doing this, special education administrators were able to develop meaning to what has previously occurred. Since meaning was given to the ESY program, administrators were able to ensure that FAPE would be implemented in their reopening plan. In this study, participants provided examples of how sense making is retrospective, they explained how they shaped their experiences into meaningful patterns and implementing it into the plans they created. Andrea expressed how this was beneficial for her:

> About three weeks prior to July 1st, my superintendent asked if I thought I could run an in person ESY program and I thought to myself, why not? We switched our plans to in person instruction and we used it to test out what September would look like. I literally cleared out the furniture in classrooms to determine spacing that was safe for our students. I did this in the summer and then used that strategy

again to reopen in the fall. It was nice because we were able to figure out things

out like taking the staff's temperature; over the summer we realized that using the

thermometer all day would require us to order more batteries. We implemented a

lot of things that summer that we were able to use in September. There were some

things that we used in ESY that did not work and we didn't use them in

September, like having the staff fill out a paper health form; that changed to

digital quick. We were able to answer a lot of questions that summer that we

previously didn't know the answers to regarding reopening in September because

of what were implemented for ESY.

Barbara explained how she was able to use her experience during her ESY program to

explain the resiliency of the students when parents give push back in returning to in

person instruction:

When we were creating our reopening plan, we had like a fifty-person task force,

including parents. Parents would say that their kid was never going to be able to

wash their hands or wear a mask. I would respond that if our most disabled

children were able to tolerate wearing a mask and shield over the summer, the rest

of the population would be able to do it as well. I understand that it is hard for us

to adjust as adults, but I used our students from ESY as an example to explain

what our kids can do and how we were able to keep them safe. Someone asked if

my students were going to be the guinea pigs and I had to respond on how

amazing our students with disabilities are, if they could do it so can anyone else.

Fiona explained that when she was creating her reopening plan for September of 2020,

she used information from what she saw in the spring of 2020.

In our reopening plan, we made an exception for all self-contained students to return every day for in person instruction when the rest of the district would follow a hybrid model. This was really based on what we saw when the students were working remotely from March to June. We were able to use that information to see what we feasibly able to do, what could work or didn't work for our students and what we had to prioritize. Even now, this year, we are one hundred percent back in person, but we have learned from the challenges and what can work. Remote instruction might not work for all students, but there can be benefits from it as well. So even though we are back in person, we are not throwing the baby out with the bathwater, we are encouraging our teachers to still use some of the technology they learned.

Socialization in Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a social process in which other people's beliefs, attitudes, values, and interpretations influence how a person makes sense of the world. In this study, participants in this study explained how socialization occurred throughout the ongoing decision-making process as they received updated guidance documents after collaborating with peers. Fiona shared what this looked like in her district:

We created a planning committee with representatives from every group. We had a lot of different stakeholders. I facilitated the special education complement. We met and started making goals for our plan and what learning would look like. I had to ensure that the plan the committee discussed followed the special education guidance. As a group, we discussed how one size fits all would not fit for our special education students and create a plan for them.

Andrea explained how she first read through all the documents and then worked collaboratively with others:

> When they were sent to us, I first read though them and highlighted the important parts. Then I met with colleagues from other districts to talk about what our understanding of the guidance was as a group. Then we discussed what our thoughts and interpretations were by our superintendent and central administration. Once we had their approval, we kind of just went with it.

Identity in Sensemaking

People's understanding of who they are influence how they make sense of things. In this study, participants used their prior identity before becoming an administrator to help them make sense of the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fiona explained how they used their experience as a psychologist to look at the situation from a trauma lens:

> It is hard for staff to understand our student's social emotional learning loss. They are so used to falling back on "when you're thirteen, you should just know." It has been my job to change that viewpoint and help them view it from a trauma lens. My teachers and building administrators are viewing certain behaviors as the student being manipulative, rather than maybe he has been traumatized. So, for example, we have a police officer every year come in and talk to our sixth grade. During this visit, one student hid under his desk when the officer entered the classroom. To me, it was clear that this student had trauma in his life, rather than he was trying to manipulate the situation. However, the staff didn't see it the same way. I guess it was so clear to me because of my psychology background. It took

a lot of explaining and discussion on my part to get them to understand my

viewpoint rather than this being a disciplinary issue. I had to remind them that in

our community, we have no idea what some of our students were faced with

during COVID-19. Unfortunately, we lost contact with some of our students for

weeks at a time. In our population, there were family members that died, we have

family members incarcerated, or just not present because they are working all the

time. That is the reality, not that they were purposely being insubordinate.

Gloria expressed that because of her background she was able to address the mental

health needs of her district, but instruction was a different story:

The first couple of months were intense, we were all wondering if what we're

doing was okay; if we were safe, if the students were safe. We questioned if the

staff and students were okay social emotionally. Because of my background of

being a psychologist, I felt that I was okay with making sure everyone's mental

health needs were taken care of.

Barbara explained how they were able to use their experience as a special education

teacher to drive their planning for remote instruction:

I taught high school in all capacities of special education. When we were

originally providing asynchronous learning, I knew that this was going to be a

challenge for my resource room teachers. I met with them as a team, and we

discussed how we could apply the guidance documents to our plan to ensure that

students were making progress. Having been a special education teacher, I was

able to understand what would work and what would not work. Together, we

created a plan on how they could address the needs of each of their students given

he constraints of remote learning but still having to provide FAPE. I think without

my experience, I would not have understood the challenge as much when it came

to creating our plan and following the guidance.

The participants in this study were either psychologist or special education

teachers. Because of their background in special education, they were able to use their

prior experience to assist in making sense of the guidance documents and ensure that

FAPE was being implemented during remote instruction or throughout their reopening

plans.

Sensemaking is Ongoing

Sensemaking is a continuous process that has no discernable beginning or end.

Participants in this study explained how the COVID-19 pandemic is still occurring and

their sense making is continuous with the changing of the guidance documents. Damian

explained how he must keep up with the changing guidance and react to the new

situation.

> In addition to being a special education administrator, I must stay on top of the
>
> quarantine rules that are ever changing. One day the staff member must
>
> quarantine for ten days; the next day this is changed to five days. In the beginning
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> we were quarantining the entire class if there was a positive case, then that moved
>
> to being within a certain distance, for a certain period of time. It gets frustrating
>
> because the guidance keeps changing and we are expected to keep up with it, be
>
> experts in it and then implement it. Being in a small district, it was all hands-on
>
> deck; we were all contact tracing and trying to figure it out together. With the
>
> change in quarantine rules and how many students and staff this is affecting, this

causes challenges for learning. We continue to discuss what kind of instruction we are going to offer for students who are quarantined or if staff is going to work from home because they have quarantine.

In addition, Cliff explained the challenge with the changing guidance and then adjusting his program accordingly:

Trying to read and keep up with everything that came out was insanity. It felt like there is a new legal opinion from our lawyers every other day. It is time consuming and painful. Every time the Department of Health or state ed issued guidance, I was reading it and saying, "how is this going to impact us, what are we going to do?" It has gotten overwhelming, trying to keep up with the ever-changing guidance; it feels like they are changing every five minutes. I felt like last year I had someone to turn to, to make sure I was implementing everything correctly and to run things by. This year, that person is overwhelmed, it's a lot. So, we are all just trying to figure it out together.

Throughout this study, there was evidence of four elements of Karl Weick's sensemaking theory. Each participants expressed evidence of one of them in their sensemaking process.

Findings for Sub Research Question 2

How did the lived experiences of special education administrators in the sense making process compare in Title I districts and non- Title I districts?

Technology

Throughout the interviews, all eight participants explained how technology was necessary in educating their students once schools were closed for in person learning.

However, this looked differently throughout each district. In some districts, all students already had their own Chromebook so the transition to remote instruction flowed easily. Andrea explained that pre-COVID, all students already had their own Chromebook. Therefore, the transition to remote instruction was not an issue. Participant 8 shared that her district also had one-to one-deployment of technology pre-COVID.

However, in other districts, technology was the cause of some of the challenges that were faced. Earl shared that all students in his district did not have a device when remote learning started:

> The biggest issue we had was rolling out technology; we had a lot of issues. In the beginning we did not have a sufficient supply of devices and families did not have Wi-Fi access. The few families that did have a personal device at home, had one. This made it impossible for a family with three students in the district to log in at the same time and be educated

In addition to not having a device, technology also affected student outcomes. Earl explained a challenge that he did not anticipate:

> Our students all had a device, but we still have connectivity issues. We came across families that did not pay their cable bill and therefore did not have Wi-Fi. Initially we bought 50 hotspots, then that became an issue. Once we gave to one, everyone wanted one or they got lost or broken and needed to be replaced. We weren't getting reimbursed for them, if the family had the money, they would have paid their bill. Also, teachers would be amazed on what they saw during a Zoom session. People would walk by in various stages of dressing or people would be screaming in the background. It was kind of an eye opener about what

some of our students' living conditions were really like. Teachers were becoming

more understanding when a student would say, "I didn't do my homework

because my little sister was up screaming all night." They saw that they weren't

making it up, this was really happening.

Fiona explained what she did to address some of issues with technology in her district:

We have families living in basements or renting out rooms of a house. We tried

hard to get our students to participate during remote instruction, but some were

concerned with what we would see. We set up backgrounds for students that

would feel less than, because of maybe what their homes looked like. We

understood that they were concerned about what their teachers might see or what

their classmates might say. We made a concerted effort of telling them, turn your

camera on but you can turn your camera so that we are not seeing the background.

We wanted our kids to feel comfortable and supported.

In addition to not having Wi-Fi connection, Gloria shared how families did not want to

sign up for assistance:

There were some families that did not want to receive any assistance for

technology. They did not want to draw attention to themselves. Where I work,

some families are renting out rooms or illegal apartments. To supply them with

the needed devices, there is paperwork that needs to be completed. Parents did not

feel comfortable in doing that, they rather their child not receive the education. In

addition, some of our students work essential jobs after school. Instead of logging

into remote instruction, they picked up more hours at work. We tried to give

incentives for our secondary students to login but there was only so much that we could do.

On the contrary, participants from non-Title I district explained how technology was not an issue in their districts. Cliff explained how they were able to transition right into live instruction to ensure that students were learning:

We did very little independent based work, we did all live zoom instruction. We knew that we had to have kids log on and have face to face time with their teacher. We knew that our students could not independently access web-based content and complete it independently. Our student already had one-to-one technology, so we were able to implement this easily.

Parent Involvement

Another difference between Title-I schools and non-Title I schools that was portrayed during the interviews was the amount of parent involvement. Gloria explained what this looked like in her district:

In the younger grades, students required a parent to sit with them. They would lose their attention quickly. They were in their home, with toys around, some were laying in their beds, they did not want to do schoolwork. Unfortunately, many of our parents were working. They do not have the kind of job that they can work remotely. In many cases, grandma was home with them, and a lot of time grandmas did not speak English. So, it was a struggle, there really was not always the support that was needed.

Damian shared a different story, in his district there was a lot of parent involvement:

We were very fortunate to have a very high level of parent involvement, they

were always in the background or in some cases on the screen. Sometimes,

students were sitting on their parents' lap. In the beginning, this really assisted

the teachers. Parents were almost acting like the 1:1 aide, refocusing and

redirecting their child.

Throughout all interviews, there was evidence of how Title-I districts were faced

with challenges that non-Title-I districts were not. These included challenges with

technology and parent involvement.

Findings for Sub Research Question 3

What new practices and/or strategies were implemented in addressing these

challenges?

Technology

All eight participants expressed how technology had a major impact on their

students' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the participants expressed

that they implemented new strategies with the use of technology that helped them

overcome some challenges. When the governor closed schools in March of 2020, special

education administrators were just beginning their annual review CSE meetings. These

are meetings that must be held for each student with an IEP to create a plan for them for

the following school year. With the sudden shift to remote learning, special education

administrators had to shift all their meetings to remote as well. Harper described the

benefits of this shift:

I think shifting CSE meetings to a remote platform has been a tremendous success

and is something that we plan on doing moving forward. At first, there was a

learning curve for both parents and staff. First, we started holding meetings via telephone conference calls and then we shifted to a video conference. The convenience of this has resulted in more parents attending meetings. They no longer must take time off or work. They can schedule a meeting with us during their lunch break. We have had meetings where parents are sitting in cars, but the important thing is that they are attending and participating. There is also an increase in both parents attending. There are also a lot less cancellations of meetings now that there is a virtual option.

Damian explained how virtual meetings have assisted with staff meetings. Because of this platform, staff can participate without having to leave their building.

I think virtual meetings have been helpful. I am trying to implement a new social emotional learning program. I have been having virtual meetings with principals and chairs, they have been able to fit the meetings into their crazy schedule. Whereas if we were going to meet in a place, it takes so much more time out of our day. I love meeting in person, but I feel like the virtual meetings are so much better in terms of time management.

Throughout the interviews, participants also explained how the use of technology had a positive impact on students. Barbara explained what this looked like in her district:

There were a lot of digital resources that our teachers discovered for our students during COVID. They are continuing to use these platforms now that we are back to face-to-face instruction. Our staff had to be creative because at the end of the day they were still responsible to implement the IEP and work on student's individual education goals. Our students cannot just sit in front of a screen in a

group, it amazed me how creative our staff was. It was not ideal, but I can feel

confident in saying that the students got something out of it.

Not only did technology have a positive impact on students, but it also had a positive

impact on staff. Cliff explained how virtual professional development has been very well

received by staff:

We moved away from our traditional professional development and had to plan

heavily on virtual professional development. This was a positive change. As

administrators, we had to be more understanding, more compassionate on what

staff was going through. We had to be more understanding of how everyone's

circumstances were different. People were afraid to come together, and we had to

accommodate that. Everything was new for everyone, we had to provide training

on technology for our staff and we had to do it by using the technology. There

was a huge learning curve for all of us. To this day, we are still holding some

professional developments on a virtual platform.

During the interviews, administrators explained how they were able to overcome

challenges they were faced with pre-COVID with increasing the use of technology in

their district.

Addressing Mental Health Needs

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed concerns for student's mental

health. Fiona shared how remote instruction contributed to the trauma that her students

were faced with. In response to the increase of mental health needs, participants shared

what new practices they are now implementing. Participant 4 shared how he is

implementing a new social/emotional curriculum to meet the needs of his students:

Prior to COVID, we discussed implementing a social emotional curriculum. When schools were closed, this went on pause. This year, our student's social emotional needs were our priority. The district assessed what was happening and collectively decided that we need to take care of their mental health before we can ask them to move forward academically. Just today, I was connected with another community support that we are trying to have in district next year. This support will provide two additional social workers for our elementary buildings to provide group counseling based on various topics as a preventative measure.

In addition to implementing a curriculum, participants shared how they are increasing their mental health staff. Gloria shared what this looks like in her district:

Our superintendent reached out to our building principals last summer and asked them what additional support they would need with the new COVID grand funding. Our high school principal requested a third school psychologist. Based on what we are seeing this year, I couldn't imagine how we would have been able to address the mental health needs of our students without this additional staff member. It feels like every day there is a new name of a student that is struggling emotionally. The amount of suicide risk assessments we have completed already this year is at an all-time high.

Some participants also shared how they have a partnership with Northwell South Oaks. Andrea shared what this partnership looks like:

Our partnership with Northwell has been very helpful this year. It includes consultation and evaluation with a psychiatrist, care coordination for families, non-emergent crisis supports, and around the clock clinical guidance. This

partnership has connected so many of our families with outside therapy and

support in which we couldn't provide in school.

Conclusion

This chapter presented findings from special education administrators sense

making experiences in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19

pandemic. The narratives of the eight participants answered the research question: What

were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the

challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19

pandemic? Content was analyzed to determine of the presence of Karl Weick's sense

making theory including retrospection, socialization, ongoing and identity. The

predetermined themes were: (a) mixed emotions; (b) increased

communication/collaboration; (c) family involvement; (d) challenges; (e) sense making.

However, additional themes were found during the coding process. The findings from

this study support the sensemaking framework that helped the researcher to understand

connections between themes and stories as they related to the participant's experiences

and perspectives.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study aimed to explore special education administrators sensemaking experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.; They study employed Karl Weick's sensemaking theory. The central research question was: What were the lived experiences of special education administrators when faced with the challenges of making sense of federal and state mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The findings of this narrative study drew upon qualitative methods based on Karl Weick's Theory of sensemaking to answer the research question. The sampling method was a purposeful sample of eight special education administrators who work in a suburban county of New York State. The researcher conducted two in-depth interviews with each participant and collected a journal sample.

Implications of Findings

Sensemaking begins when an unexpected event causes a disruption of the normal flow of activities. For this study, the disruption was the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused school districts to close for in-person instruction and shift to remote learning platforms. Once schools closed, special education administrators were faced with the challenge of implementing federal and state guidance into their districts remote learning plan. Findings demonstrated that special education administrators were constrained more heavily by certain aspects of sensemaking. Specifically, they (1) put the pieces together in a meaningful way after an event occurred, (2) used experiences to determine how to make sense of the situation, (3) considered and reconsidered the situation of the course of

time, reacting to new situations are they arose, (4) used their understanding of who they

are to influence how they made sense of the challenges (Weick, 1995).

They key findings from this narrative study were:

1. Participants used their experience in implementing an in-person summer

program to assist them with implementing the guidance documents while

creating their reopening plans.

2. Districts created reopening committees, including all stakeholders, to make

sense of guidance documents and implement them into their district programs.

3. The pandemic is still occurring, and the guidance documents continue to

change. Special education administrators must keep up with the changing

guidance and adjust their programs to the changes.

4. Participants used their prior experiences to make sense of the challenges and

work with colleagues in their district programs to ensure that FAPE was being

offered to students with disabilities.

Retrospective

Throughout the sensemaking process regarding implementing the federal and

state guidance documents, special education administrators extracted cues from their

environment and used hindsight to determine if they made the correct decisions. These

findings agree with Weick's sensemaking process. When districts were creating their

reopening plans for the fall of 2020, special education administrators shared how they

used their knowledge from the spring of 2020 to prioritize that all students with

disabilities returned for in person learning. They used their experience during the spring,

and they saw what their students and teachers were struggling with in providing FAPE

through the remote platforms. When creating their reopening plans, they used this knowledge, along with the guidance documents, to provide FAPE for their students to ensure that they would make progress.

Additionally, participants who provided in person ESY programs used their experience during this time to edit their plans for September. Administrators were able to see what worked and what did not work during the summer while making sense of the guidance documents. Special education administrators never had to ensure that desks were placed five feet apart to fit in a classroom, take and log temperatures, provide PPE, and ensure that students with disabilities were able to tolerate wearing it for the full day. They were able to use their experience during the summer program doing these things to share with their reopening committee on what could be implemented and what needed to be changed.

Social

According to Weick, the sensemaking process is social and special education administrators were constantly integrating information from their peers, stakeholders, and experts in education when making sense of the guidance documents. This study found that districts created reopening committees with district and building administrators, teachers, providers, parents, nurses, community members and students. In addition, participants shared how they met with special education administrators from other districts and discussed how to make sense of their interpretations of the guidance documents. Together, they shared ideas of what they were doing in their district and how the guidance was going to be implemented.

Surprisingly, Gloria shared that collaborating with special education administrators from other districts was not beneficial to her. She shared that it caused more anxiety for her because no one really had a concreate answer. During these meetings, they were all trying to make sense of it, but no one really know what was right. This participant shared that she rather work solely with her district committee because they understood the unique needs of her population.

Ongoing

The sensemaking process during the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing, it has no discernable beginning or end. Special education administrators shared how they were constantly acting in the changing environment that provided many different stimuli. They shared how the guidance documents changed from the start of the pandemic to present day and they had to make sense of them while changing their programs accordingly.

Special education administrators shared how during the start of the pandemic; the guidance documents include flexibility in providing FAPE. However, this changed by September of 2020. Special education administrators had to make sense of the changing guidance and reassess their programs to ensure that they complied.

In addition to implementing FAPE, special education administrators had to take on a new role and make sense of the pandemic guidance documents to ensure safety for their students. Participants shared how quarantining and social distancing rules have changed over time and they had to adapt to them. In the beginning, they made sense of the documents that full classes need to quarantine if there was an exposure. This changed to students that were in close proximity and now in most cases, no one has to quarantine.

Identity

Based on their own identity and past experiences in special education, combined with their identity in their district, special education administrators created and implementing special education programs based on the federal and state guidance documents that were issued. During the first interview, participants shared their backgrounds in education; six were school psychologist and two were special education teachers. In addition, all participants shared their years of experience in education and their current position.

The data from this study showed that participants background knowledge and position helped them in making informed decisions during the sensemaking process. Participants shared how their experience as a school psychologist helped them understand the mental health needs of students and staff. The two participants who were teachers previously shared how their experience help them to understand what would and would not work during remote instruction and while creating their reopening plans.

Relationship to Prior Research

The current investigation provided insight into special education administrators experiences as they navigated challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the pandemic is still occurring, this study contributed to filling the literature gap on how the pandemic affected students with disabilities. Some factors that contributed to the challenges that special education administrators were faced with were staffing, parent involvement, remote instruction, mental health, and gaps between Title 1 and non-Title 1 districts. A factor that assisted with these challenges was increased collaboration with all stakeholders.

The research in this study supported Schuck and Lambert's (2020) study, that reported on challenges of supporting students with disabilities through remote learning. These challenges included inequality of resources and needed to rely on home support to make progress. Throughout this study, participants shared how it was difficult for the needs of students with disabilities to be met on a remote platform. They shared how their gross and fine motor needs could not be addressed through remote physical and occupational therapy. Participants all shared how students with disabilities had to be supported at home and when they were not, remote learning was not successful. The research in this study also supported the need for communication with parents and related to the study by Belenardo (2001). Belenardo (2001) reported that parents experienced an increase sense of connectiveness and community when the school extended itself. Mulholland & Becker (2008) found that parents were concerned with family-school partnerships, family -teacher partnerships, and special education -general education partnerships. In the current study, participants shared how parents had to assist their child with disabilities during remote instruction. During this time, parents were taught different ways to manage their child's behaviors at home. There was an increase of the home - school connection because parents were acting as their child's 1:1 aide. This enabled parents to have a better understanding of their child's needs.

In a study by Stephens et al. (2020), researchers used sensemaking to conclude that the pandemic is likely to permanently change organizations and practices. The findings in the current research refuted this study because all participants stated that they were working on creating a learning environment that looked like it did pre-COVID. Participants shared how their current programs have all returned to in person instruction.

They shared how they are no longer offering a remote learning option because they saw

that it was not successful for students with disabilities

During the sensemaking process, participants in this study explained how there

needed to be an increase in collaboration between all stakeholders. This relates to the

study by Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) that concluded that

collaboration has a positive impact on student achievement. Participants in this study

shared how they relied on colleagues both in their district and outside of their districts to

assist them with making sense of the guidance documents to implement them into their

program. Only one participant stated that collaboration with peers from other districts

was not beneficial in making decisions that would impact her students.

The current study researched the differences between Title-I and non-Title I

school districts. In a study conducted by Cascio and Reber (2013), it was determined that

the Title I program is too small and therefore, gaps in spending remain. In the current

study, participants from Title-I schools explained how technology created a challenge for

them because not all their families were given a device for each child in the household.

Whereas participants in non-Title I district did not indicate that possession of a device

cause a challenge for them.

In addition to challenges due to technology, participants shared that staffing was

also a challenge due the COVID-19 pandemic. This relates to a study completed by

Lashly and Boscardin (2013) that stated a significant challenge for special education

administrators is the retention of qualified staff. During interviews, participants shared

how it is difficult to implement the IEP because there is a shortage of physical and

occupational therapist. Participant 5 shared how teachers are working on these skills; however, this is not how it was intended.

Limitations of the Study

There were limited research studies that involved special education challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are limitations that need to be considered when reading this study. As a qualitative study that relied heavily on interviews and a reflective journal, this study was subject to issues of validity and reliability. The sample did not represent a broad selection of special education administrators. It only included participants from a suburban county, rural and urban counties were not included. In addition, it only included special education administrators from public schools, participants from private, charter and parochial schools were not included. To enhance reliability and validity, two in-depth interviews were conducted with administrators from districts with a certain number of students and socioeconomic status.

The second limitation is that the pandemic is ongoing and therefore, the challenges and the sensemaking process can change as the pandemic continues to change. At the time of participant interviews, the Omicron variant had a big impact on schools, although currently it is trending downward. Time constraints for project implementation and remote data collection due to social distancing restrictions were limitations as well. To overcome this challenge, interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform and were audio and video recorded and transcribed.

Recommendations for Further Practice

The findings from this study contributed to the existing literature within special education and the challenges special education administrators need to address. When the

COVID-19 pandemic began, special education administrators did not have a guide to follow when making sense of the changing guidance. Special education administrators can use the findings of this study to provide a basis to inform and guide, should another pandemic occur. This includes immediately collaborating with all stakeholders, communicating with families, and setting up mental health supports for students and staff. In addition, the findings in this study show how participants used Karl Weick's sense making theory to make informed decisions. Administrators can use this theory as a guide as well.

The findings of this study brought to light the need for mental health supports for children and staff. This can help special education administrators create non-traditional learning opportunities for students who struggle with their mental health, in particular school refusal. This includes a truncated schedule, remote learning from inside the school, and access to school grounds after/before hours to be comfortable with the setting.

The findings also show how parent involvement can be positive and negative. Should schools have to shift to remote learning again, special education administrators can use the findings in this study on how parents were beneficial to the child's success to create a guideline on how parents should be participating and assisting their child during remote instruction. Administrators shared how too much parent involvement was not beneficial and therefore, these findings can also assist administrators with setting up boundaries for parents.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this narrative study added literature to the experiences special education administrators were faced with during the COIVD-19 pandemic. The participants in this study included administrators in districts that served K-12, K-6 and 7-12. Future researchers should consider comparing elementary only or secondary only grades to determine if the experiences differ.

This study only included suburban districts. Future researchers should consider comparing suburban districts with rural and urban districts to determine if the experiences were similar or different. In addition, they can determine if the strategies to face the challenges are different.

In addition, once the pandemic is over future researchers should study how student and staff mental health needs changed over time and how these changes were addressed. School administrators would be better prepared to meet these needs should another pandemic occur.

Conclusion

It was evident that special education administrators faced many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences changed from the beginning of the pandemic when schools were closed for in-person learning, to when schools were reopened for the first time, to the present day. Special education administrators used Karl Weick's sensemaking theory when addressing challenges of implementing the federal and state guidance documents. These challenges included a need for an increase in staffing, parent involvement, equity, and technology. Outcomes that were portrayed included an increase of communication and collaboration, and an increase of staff and student mental health

needs. Special education administrators had to create new strategies to use technology for

teaching and a platform to conduct virtual meetings and address the mental health needs

to ensure that FAPE was being provided.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL MEMO

Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Dec 22, 2021 1:21:56 PM EST

PI: Lauren Lombardi

CO-PI: Joan Birringer-Haig

The School of Education, Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2022-185** *The Lived Experiences of Special Education Administrators During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Dear Lauren Lombardi:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *The Lived Experiences of Special Education Administrators During the COVID-19 Pandemic* . The approval is effective from December 22, 2021 through December 21, 2022.

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data must be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP

Chair, Institutional Review Board

Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a research study *the* lived experiences of the challenges special education administrators faced in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am Lauren Lombardi, and I am conducting a study for my dissertation study titled *The Lived Experiences of Special Education Administrators During the COVID-19 Pandemic.*

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this narrative study will be to understand the lived experiences of the challenges special education administrators faced in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selection criteria for this study will be that potential participants are special education administrators, over the age of 21. The rationale for selecting these participants is that they give a voice to the special education administrators who faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Procedures: If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a series of two interviews. The first interview will be one-to-one with the investigator through zoom and will last approximately 30 minutes. The second interview will be about one week later and conducted via zoom for about 50 minutes. In addition, I will ask you to reflect on

their emotions during this time in a few sentences. During the interviews, I will be asking you questions about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Possible Risks and Benefits: There is no known potential risk associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Pseudonyms will be used in the study to protect your identity. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer for the interviews.

Confidentiality: Your identity as a participant will remain confidential. Your name or the name of your district will not be included in any forms, transcription, data analysis, or summary reports. Pseudonyms will be used in the study. This consent form is the only document identifying you as a participant and it will be stored securely in the office of the Principal Investigator available only to the Principal Investigator in a locked cabinet. If you are interested in securing a copy of the results, you may contact the Principal Investigator.

Contact Information: If you have questions about the purpose of this investigation, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Lauren Lombardi at Lauren.lombardi19@stjohns.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a human participant, you may contact the University's Human Subjects Review Board at St. John's University at 718.990.1955. If you feel you have any questions or concerns about the study, please contact the dissertation chair and Co-Investigator, Dr. Joan Birringer-Haig, at birringj@stjohns.edu.

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate in the study.

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

Your signature acknowledges your consent to be audio and video recorded via Zoom for the interviews

_____ I agree to be audio recorded during the interview.

_____ I agree to be video recorded during the interview.

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INTEREST

You are invited to participate in a study on the experiences of special education administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Lauren Lombardi, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership at St. John's University, Queens, N.Y. I am conducting a study for my dissertation titled: *The Lived Experiences of Special Education Administrators During the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

The purpose of this narrative study will be to understand the lived experiences of the challenges special education administrators faced in implementing federal and state guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selection criteria for this study will be that potential participants are special education administrators, over the age of 21. The rationale for selecting these participants is that they give a voice to the special education administrators who faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participation requirements for this study include interviewing special education administrators about the experiences while implementing the federal and state guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first interview will be one-to-one with the

investigator through zoom and will last approximately 30 minutes. The second interview will be about one week later and conducted via zoom for about 50 minutes. In addition, I will ask you to reflect on their emotions during this time in a few sentences. During the interviews, I will be asking you questions about your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the researcher would like each participant to reflect on their emotions during this time in a few sentences.

The two interviews will be virtually recorded using zoom. The recorded interviews will be transcribed and used for the study. You may review these recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed. Participation in this study will involve approximately an hour and a half of your time.

There is no known potential risk associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Pseudonyms will be used in the study to protect your identity. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer for the interviews.

At no time will your name or any identifying information about you be included in the study. Confidentiality of your interview and other records provided will be strictly maintained by storing the information on a locked and password-protected laptop in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to any of the information provided. Confidentiality of your information shared will be maintained.

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator have insight into the experiences of special education administrators during unprecedented times of crisis. The study findings may have informational benefits for

educators and policymakers regarding possible ways to better support implementation of federal and state guidelines during a crisis.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have any questions about the purpose of this investigation, or if there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Lauren Lombardi at (516) 987-3104 or email Lauren.lombardi19@stjohns.edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

_____   _____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Lauren Lombardi

Principal Investigator

Doctoral Candidate, Administrative and Instructional Leadership

St. John's University

8000 Utopia Boulevard

Queens, NY 11439

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<u>Introduction</u>

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. As we previously discussed, I am working on my doctoral degree in educational leadership with an emphasis implementing the special education state and federal guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am particularly interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences during this time and the challenges you were faced with. I appreciate you taking time out of your schedules to be here and for allowing me to hear your story. I would like to review again the participant agreement form that was previously sent to you and answer any questions that you may have. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and the information you share will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be shared in any subsequent publication. If you agree, this interview will be video and audio recorded to get an accurate transcription of our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin? The interview method that will be used is considered narrative. It is like having an informal conversation. You will notice that I may not ask lots of questions and most of our time together will allow you an opportunity to share your story with a few prompts.

<u>Interview 1 Questions:</u>

1- What is your educational background?

2- What made you choose to become a special education administrator?

3- How many years of experience do you have in education? As a special education administrator?

4- How did your educational background prepare you for your current position?

5- How would you describe your leadership style?

6- Please describe your role as a special education administrator.

7- Please describe specific leadership skills that you feel are essential for leading a successful special education program.

8- Please identify specific knowledge/ experiences that you feel are beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs.

9- Pre COVID, tell me about your greatest challenges that you experienced in leading special education programs?

10- Pre COVID, please tell me about your experience in overcoming this challenge.

11- Pre-COVID please explain what collaboration means to you and how much you can collaborate with colleagues in your current role.

Journal

On March 19, 2020, Governor Cuomo ordered all schools to close for in person instruction. In a few sentences, please describe your immediate thoughts/feelings. How did these thoughts/feelings change over time?

Interview 2:

On March 19, 2020, Governor Cuomo ordered all schools to close for in person instruction. The following questions will be based on your experiences after hearing this order.

1- Tell me about your experience in making your remote learning plan for special education.

2- On March 20, 2020, NYSED issued a guidance document. Tell me about your experience in making sense of this

3- Please describe specific knowledge/experiences that you feel are beneficial in making sense of the issued guidance documents.

4- (If participant indicates that they collaborated with colleagues)

Please explain how you worked with other building administrators, teachers and staff when making decisions for your district programs? How did they support your viewpoints? Please explain if there were any challenges.

(If participant indicates that they did not collaborate with colleagues)

Please describe how individually making decisions effected your program?

Explain if you feel that if you worked collaboratively with colleges, there would have been a different plan/outcome.

5- During the Summer of 2020, you were faced with the challenge of creating a re-opening plan to get the students to return to face to face instruction. Please tell me about this experience.

6- In September of 2020, NYS issued reopening guidance. Tell me about your experience in reading this after you already created and submitted your reopening plan that previous summer.

7- Looking back to March 2020, please tell me about the biggest challenge you were faced with during this unprecedented time.

8- Please explain how you overcame this challenge.

9- Do you feel that COVID-19 changed how you identify your role as a special education administrator? Please explain.

10- If you could rewind time to February of 2020, what advice would you give special education administrators to address their students' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic? Would you change anything that you did?

11- The COVID-19 pandemic is still occurring, and we are still seeing the effects of it. Please explain if the challenges you are faced with have changed from March 2020 to now.

12- This was a difficult time for everyone, please explain what helped you get through each day.

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